

# **Parental Strategies and Embodied Hope of Children in Post-Apocalyptic Works**

*The Road and Bird Box: A study of Literary and Film Adaptation Strategies*

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### **Abstract**

This thesis investigates alternate parental strategies in Post-Apocalyptic fiction by examining the core family units in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. Additionally, I will analyse their respective film adaptations directed by John Hillcoat and Susanne Bier, to conduct a comparative analysis of the story's literary and visual depiction. To aid the literary and adaptation investigation, I will utilize selected concepts of Bowenian theory, developed by Dr. Murray Bowen, to heighten the analysis of family relations.

I argue that instilling the embodied hope of children is the result of successful parental strategies.

**Keywords:** family units, post-apocalyptic fiction, parental strategies, adaptation studies, Bowen family systems theory.

## Introduction

Since the dawn of humanity, we have pondered the inescapable fate of our mortality. The only guarantee humans have is that of a life cycle, ending with death. Naturally, as culture and literature are so closely intertwined, death is a theme that has been further explored by writers and philosophers through centuries. In recent years, I have noticed how the fear of mortality is prominent in Post-Apocalyptic fiction. In the aftermath of a global catastrophe, the remaining part of humanity fight for their survival without knowing what the future holds. Here, a question naturally arises; what about the family units amidst the chaos, how do they adapt their parental strategies to prepare the children for an unclear, bleak future?

After all, for centuries, there has been a chain of key milestones most of the world's population undergoes, as if climbing steps. One is born into this world, seeks education, falls in love, gets married, has children, works until one retires, and then at the end of the road, one passes away. These points apply to the majority of the modern individual as one emerges from a family unit of different sorts (parents, guardians, or foster parents.) As a result, this creates a sense of structure to follow. In the face of catastrophes, however, the foundation of society crumbles, along with the laws and ethical values. Without the constructs of society, it naturally makes room for anarchy, creating such an overwhelming state of uncertainty and fear for the future. It becomes easy to fall into a state of nihilism, where one rejects any meaning or purpose behind life. Besides the immediate threat of violence, nihilism poses a significant threat to family units and their efforts towards raising the future generation, as it questions the very purpose of existing at all. The curiosity for the broken family units in a post-apocalyptic world naturally raises a question of *how* the parental figures adapt to their circumstances, and why. Besides the traditional efforts towards raising a child (feed, clothe, protect, etc.), the respective parental figure would have to construct parental strategies for sustaining hope to fend off potential feelings of nihilism in the children, protect them from harm and prepare them for the world to come.

This curiosity about the parental strategies in broken family units depicted in Post-Apocalyptic fiction became the inspiration for this thesis. As a result, I will compare/contrast alternative strategies of parenting under extraordinary circumstances; to do this, I am performing close readings of two novels and their respective film adaptations. To highlight how the family operates, I will utilize selected categories from Bowen family systems theory to enhance the literary discussion. In the end, I will consider how the family units engage with

the concept of the embodied hope of children, a term I utilize to describe how the children establish a focus that enforces a fighting spirit and sparks positive enforcement of hope. I would argue that instilling embodied hope is a result of successful parenting strategies.

The literary sources I have chosen to utilize for this thesis is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. I will examine the man and the boy in *The Road* against Malorie, the Boy and the Girl in *Bird Box*.<sup>12</sup> These stories do not solely revolve around family units who have been deeply affected by global catastrophes; each parental figure utilizes strategies that greatly contrast each other, creating many elements to consider for this analysis. Both narratives depict a story with only one parental figure who must raise and protect their child(ren) alone. Furthermore, the children in both narratives are nameless, which is a fascinating element creating a foundation for investigation. The families have certain parallel features, with the one parent protecting their child(ren), but there are also some significant differences. The family depicted in *The Road*, consists of the man and his young boy, while it is never explicitly said in the novel, the movie adaptation (which McCarthy directly influenced) portrays him as eight to ten years old. In *Bird Box*, the family consists of Malorie and two pre-schoolers, referred to as 'the Boy' and 'the Girl'. The age difference will create layers to the investigation, as the analysis will consider the cognitive limitations the youngest children possess, in comparison to the boy in McCarthy's novel. All these factors affect the parental strategies the respective parents develop.

As part of this thesis, it is useful to ask; what is a parental strategy? In our modern society, parents develop a strategy for several reasons to influence and encourage the child's development in a certain way. The parent naturally develops (whether consciously or not) a set of strategies to raise their child, traditionally to encourage good manners, or teach the importance of discipline (in completing homework/chores). However, this thesis will investigate family units and their parental strategies in abnormal circumstances, in literary texts depicting an 'end-of-the-world' scenario in which many traditional approaches to parenting falls away. Hence, I will investigate the parental strategies for sustaining hope to raise a child in a post-apocalyptic world.

As a part of the introduction, I will introduce the authors and the novels to be analysed. Born in Rhode Island, Cormac McCarthy was raised in a Roman Catholic family, and he is the third of six children. He majored in liberal arts at the University of Tennessee, and he published two short stories in the student literary magazine *Phoenix* ('A Drowning

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<sup>1</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Josh Malerman. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018)

incident' and 'Wake for Susan'). His skills as a writer were noticed early on, as he won the Ingram-Merrill Award for creative writing in 1959 and 1960.<sup>3</sup> His first novel *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) received mixed reviews. Orville Prescott criticized it for being a 'jumpy, disconnected narrative'; however, he admits that despite being an exasperating read, it is also an impressive book.<sup>4</sup> McCarthy travelled Europe with his second wife before moving back to Tennessee and regularly published books that gained significant attention and praise. Specifically, *Blood Meridian* and *Suttree* are now generally considered his finest work to date.<sup>5</sup> As a writer, McCarthy is dedicated to the story's authenticity and depth, as he has a habit of undergoing long extensive research processes and even learned Spanish to further this search.

*The Road*, first published in 2006, is a deeply personal novel inspired by McCarthy's relationship with his son, who was eight years old at the time of publication. The novel won a Pulitzer prize in 2007 and caught the attention of TV host Oprah Winfrey who heavily promoted the book as a selection for her book club.<sup>6</sup> The story takes place after an unclear cataclysm, the only description of the incident is 'a long shear of light and then a series of low concussion.'<sup>7</sup> The description of the event leaves much up for interpretation, as McCarthy focus lies in the aftermath of a burnt America where the remainder of humanity is slowly dying out. How they ended up here, whether a man-caused the incident or not, what is important is how they move forward. McCarthy's novel depicts the story of a man and his boy following the road to the South coast, during which they must fend off cannibals, while they continuously scavenge for food. Death and mortality are clear themes from the start, as the man coughs up bloody phlegm and step over corpses on the road. The man struggles to defend the boy from the cruel reality of their world, while also preparing him for the uncertain future when he is gone. In the end, the man wants to protect the boy's 'fire,' a metaphor for the will to live on nobly, and with empathy. As reporter John Jurgensen phrases it, the story is 'as intimate as it is grim' and through its depiction displays the best and worst of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Josh Malerman first came to renown as the lead singer and songwriter of the Detroit rock band, The High Strung, and published his debut novel *Bird Box* with HarperCollins in

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<sup>3</sup> "Biography ." CormacMcCarthy.com. <https://www.cormacmccarthy.com/biography/>

<sup>4</sup> Prescott, Orville. "Still Another Disciple of William Faulkner." The New York Times. The New York Times.. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/mccarthy-orchard.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Biography ." CormacMcCarthy.com. <https://www.cormacmccarthy.com/biography/>

<sup>6</sup> "Oprah's Exclusive Interview with Cormac McCarthy Video." Oprah.com. <https://www.oprah.com/oprahbookclub/oprah-exclusive-interview-with-cormac-mccarthy-video>.

<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 54

<sup>8</sup> Jurgensen, John. "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, November 13, 2009. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572>.

2014.<sup>9</sup> While touring America for a year, he wrote many rough drafts for novels in between cities. For a significant time, Malerman lived in his ‘glorious delusion’ in which he dreamed up interviews, pretended to have debates with agents or editors, and placed invisible hardcover books upon his shelves.<sup>10</sup> A high school friend of Malerman, Dave Simmer, helped him realize his dreams and forwarded his manuscripts to his contacts in the publishing industry. Since his debut novel, he has published three more books and a string of short stories, while also working on a new album with his band. Malerman did not conduct excessive research for *Bird Box*. However, he did rent a house full of birds, where the birds would ‘literally [fly] around this big open space while [he] was writing [*Bird Box*].’<sup>11</sup> Malerman comments how it ‘obviously influenced the book in certain ways’ without specifying, assumedly, he may think of the thematic role of the birds.

Josh Malerman’s novel ‘*Bird Box*’ depicts the tale of a woman, Malorie, who has to raise two children alone after creatures have invaded the globe, by preparing for a journey to a sanctuary. Upon witness, the creatures cause hallucinations or visions that force their victims to commit suicide or become brainwashed prophets encouraging people to see. Malorie faces the difficult task of raising the children in the post-apocalyptic world, utilizing violence to train the children to wake with their eyes closed and navigate their world using only their hearing. Like McCarthy’s *The Road*, the novel depicts the story of a journey as Malorie is preparing the children for a voyage on a river, as they try to reach the sanctuary. The film adaptation premiered on Netflix in December 2018 and turned into a worldwide phenomenon. Over 45 million people turned to Netflix to stream the post-apocalyptic thriller.<sup>12</sup> These literary works and their film adaptation are the primary texts in this thesis.

### **Theory and Method**

This thesis examines key literary and theoretical elements. The literary texts are Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Josh Malerman’s *Bird Box*, and they are chosen as a result of their focus on the family unit in an apocalyptic scenario where the aim is to ensure the survival of the children. Furthermore, this thesis intends to investigate the film adaptations of these works, to see how the literary elements were transferred (or not) onto the big screen, and

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<sup>9</sup> “Josh Malerman.” IMDb. IMDb.com. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4789922/bio>.

<sup>10</sup> “About Josh Malerman.” Josh Malerman: American author and songwriter. <https://joshmalerman.com/about-josh-malerman/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kirkland, Justin. “The ‘Bird Box’ Author Says His Sequel ‘Malorie’ Will Shed New Light on The Monsters.” *Esquire*. *Esquire*, March 18, 2019. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a26827372/bird-box-sequel-interview/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Bird Box.” IMDb. IMDb.com, November 21, 2018. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2737304/>.



how that may enhance or alter certain thematic elements. In this way, this thesis will investigate the complete presentation of the narratives through the written and visual medium. This thesis will examine how the parental figures develop strategies to ensure their survival and sustain hope for the future. Additionally, I want to investigate the children's role and how they carry a great significance to these post-apocalyptic stories. Their existence metaphorically and physically operates as embodied hope as they will be part of shaping the future and be part of the survival of humanity.

Since this thesis intends to investigate family units, it became necessary to look for theoretical guidance concerning family relations and its psychology. Psychiatrist Murray Bowen, a prominent developer of Bowen Family System Theory, revolutionized modern psychology. After his passing in 1990, he left behind him a legacy of a new way of seeing and thinking about the human phenomenon. The theory was developed by Dr. Murray Bowen, whose goal was to 'bring the study of the human into the realm of accepted science.'<sup>13</sup> What made Bowen's theory extraordinary? Essentially, Bowen argued that a superior life course is founded on thinking rather than feeling, although the feelings of the individual hold high importance.

This is illustrated in Bowen's differentiation of self-scale. This concept is defined as 'the capacity of the family system and its members to maintain thoughtfulness while experiencing strong emotions, managing emotional activity.' Furthermore, Bowen argues that 'more differentiated persons have greater capacities for regulating emotions, thinking clearly while experiencing stress, relating to others, and are less likely to be emotionally reactive.'<sup>14</sup> The theory's focal point lies in the family as an emotional unit in relation to the individual. Specifically, the approach stresses the importance of systems thinking to describe complex interactions in the family unit, and about being aware of how one holds a small part of something larger than oneself.<sup>15</sup> Bowen's theory has produced clinically sound results not only in families but also in professional organizations such as businesses, universities, and congregations.<sup>16</sup> Bowen developed eight concepts in an effort to make sense of and solve complicated family relations. For this thesis, I will utilize Bowenian theory to identify and

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<sup>13</sup> Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: a New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group*. Lake Frederick, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2013. p 1

<sup>14</sup> Kerr, M. E., & Bowen, M. *Family evaluation*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1988 **quoted in** Messina, Kenneth C, Jered B Kolbert, Matthew J Bundick, Laura M Crothers, and Donald A Strano. "The Impact of Counseling on Bowen's Differentiation of Self." *The Family Journal* 26, no. 2 (2018): 150-55. p 150

<sup>15</sup> "Theory." The Bowen Center, September 20, 2018. <https://thebowncenter.org/theory/>.

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: a New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group*. Lake Frederick, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2013. Back cover

explain the complicated family relations in these literary works and respective film adaptations.

I will investigate the character relationships through Bowen's theory as a result of the undeniable link between cultural and literary discourses.<sup>17</sup> The complex interactions within a family unit are then naturally reflected in literary works. Literary works have a tremendously positive effect on the reader. Although fictional, the positive impact of literature in terms of the development of empathy and understanding complex human experiences is unquestionable. Several independent researchers have discovered this. One example is Dr. Keith Oatley's thesis on how fiction effectively functions as a simulation of social worlds. Oatley argues that 'fiction can be thought of as a form of consciousness of selves and others that can be passed from an author to a reader [...] and can be internalized to augment everyday cognition.'<sup>18</sup> This link was especially prominent in the exploration of characters.<sup>19</sup> If literary narratives effectively function as real-life simulations, then arguably, they can work as a foundation of investigation of phenomenology and family systems theory. Hence, this thesis will utilize Bowen Theory to shed light on the complicated family units depicted in *The Road* and *Bird Box*, in efforts to enhance further the link of understanding the motivation and function of the characters. Effectively, this theory will fuel a specifically focused psychoanalytic reading of the family units.

Bowen Theory, however, is not without its weaknesses, as there have been a series of criticisms. Former director of Psychiatry at the Bronx Psychiatric Center (NYC) wrote a paper critiquing family systems theory as a 'paradigm which has been stretched too far, both as a representation of family dynamics and as a guide to clinical intervention.'<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Professor Carmen Knudson-Martin wrote a paper to address the potential biases against women in theories of family theory.<sup>21</sup> There have also been reports discussing the lack of empirical support to some of Bowen's theories, such as the theory that suggests people marry people with the same differentiation or the idea concerning sibling position. However, there has been literary investigation that demonstrates a general association between personality

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<sup>17</sup> Hesaraki, Mohammad Reza. "Literature and Culture: Both Interaction and Effectiveness ." *International Journal of Social Sciences (IJSS)* , 2014, 4, no. 3 (September 24, 2014): 23–25. <https://doi.org/https://www.sid.ir/FileServer/JE/5053020140304.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Oatley, Keith. "Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 8 (2016): 618-28. p 618

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p 622

<sup>20</sup> Pam, Alvin. "Family Systems Theory—A Critical View." *New Ideas in Psychology* 11, no. 1 (1993): 77–94. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0732-118x\(93\)90021-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0732-118x(93)90021-5).

<sup>21</sup> Knudson-Martin, Carmen. "The Female Voice: Applications To Bowens Family Systems Theory." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 20, no. 1 (1994): 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.1994.tb01009.x>.

characteristics and sibling position.<sup>22</sup> These observations and criticisms towards Bowen Theory are essential to be aware of, to utilize the theory. While this theoretical approach is flawed, it has become a prominent tool to examine complex family relations in literature.

Family Systems Theory separates itself from traditional literary psychoanalysis, which is distinctly more ‘subjective’ in its approach. Traditionally, a psychoanalytic approach to literary studies relies more on free association through transference between the analyst and its subject, or effectively the reader and the literary text. Family Systems Theory aims to demonstrate how the study of the individual and the family can be objective through the utilization of the eight concepts constructed by Murray Bowen. The study of the family and literary studies has become a significantly illuminating analytic basis in a contemporary critique. In *Reading the Family Dance: Family Systems Therapy and Literary Study*, John V. Knapp argues:

The family system becomes the source of the matrix of identity, rather than only the individual character. Thus, the “causes” of a given problem in growing up (and beyond) in fictional and real families is much less the person construct or single event, and more the emotional process that links people and events. [...] To understand a member(s) of a fictional family, one needs to understand the family system.<sup>23</sup>

If the reader knows with the terminology and processes of Bowen theory, it gives invaluable insight towards examine the behavioural patterns and primarily how each character functions in their family units.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this, I will utilize Family Systems theory in a designated chapter in which I will map out key narrative points that engage with the eight concepts.

### **Structure**

In the first chapter, I will conduct a close reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* to map out and examine four prominent parental strategies utilized to prepare the son for the future and to sustain hope. Firstly, there will be an examination of how the man establishes a sense of safety, and how he navigates various discussions (concerning death, starvation, or

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, Richard B., Shayne Anderson, and Davelyne Kaulana Keals. “Is Bowen Theory Valid? A Review Of Basic Research.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 30, no. 4 (2004): 453–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2004.tb01255.x>.

<sup>23</sup> Knapp, John V., and Kenneth Womack. *Reading the Family Dance: Family Systems Therapy and Literary Study*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003. <https://www.questia.com/read/125132834/reading-the-family-dance-family-systems-therapy> p 14-15

<sup>24</sup> “Reading the Family Dance: Family Systems Therapy and Literary Study.” Kenneth Womack. <https://kennethwomack.com/books/nonfiction/reading-the-family-dance-family-systems-therapy-and-literary-study/>.

cannibalism, to name some examples) through the use of the word ‘okay’ – a phrase operating as a signpost to reach an agreement or common understanding. It is perhaps one of the essential methods of the man’s parenting, as it challenges the boy’s experience of nihilism and encourages an open conversation, effectively operating as both an outlet traumatic experiences and strengthening their emotional intimacy. The next parental strategy is the use of religious imagery and motivation, as famously expressed in the quote: ‘He knew only that the child was his warrant... If he is not the word of God God never spoke.’<sup>25</sup> This strategy is complex in its construction, as the man has a conflicting relationship to God while at the same time utilizing his faith as a tool to spark a sense of purpose.

Furthermore, this chapter will examine an important element of McCarthy’s novel; how the term ‘carrying the fire’ multifaceted has a nature that functions as a moral compass, alights a fighting spirit, and encourages the father and son to be ‘the good guys.’<sup>26</sup> Naturally, this phrase ‘carrying the fire’ has been discussed in detail by many literary critics and scholars alike, however here it will be examined as to how it operates as a parental strategy. It stands as a reminder to live virtuously, despite living in a world of anarchy and misery. Lastly, this chapter will investigate a more controversial strategy, as the man teaches the boy how to carry and use a firearm, as well as instructs him how to commit suicide. Additionally, it separates itself from the other strategies, that are naturally more nurturing and gentle, as it reflects the unforgiving cruelty of their world and how the family can protect their humanity by, in the face of starvation or cannibal cults, committing suicide. These four strategies are the critical tactics developed and used by the family unit and operate as a motivation or protection to navigate through an unforgiving, harsh world.

The third chapter will investigate the film adaptation by Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* by director John Hillcoat and screenwriter Joe Penhall who created the film by the same title. This chapter builds upon the previous one, as I will investigate how the strategies are modified when narrative transfers from literary to visual depiction. Naturally, this section invites a discussion on the fidelity of film adaptation studies where appropriate and an investigation into the author’s involvement in the adaptation process. In the conclusion, I will compare how the creative changes affect the family unit and the story’s depiction.

The following chapter will examine Josh Malerman’s debut novel *Bird Box*, about a young mother named Malorie, who must come to terms with her motherhood and protect her

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<sup>25</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p 3

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p 87

two children on a dangerous voyage to a sanctuary.<sup>27</sup> Overall, Malorie adapts an approach to parenthood that significantly contrasts with McCarthy's novel, one that focused much on emotional intimacy and close relations. I will analyse three parental strategies Malorie utilizes, which are establishing emotional cut-off, developing a training regime, and not naming the children. It is worth noting the significant difference in material here. While McCarthy's novel is filled with frequent dialogue between the man and his son, whereas Malerman's book has two plotlines, in which the children only partake in half of the narrative, and even here, there is limited interaction. Additionally, as McCarthy has a great stature as a writer, there is significantly more critical writing on his literary works, in contrast to Malerman, as *Bird Box* was his debut novel. Despite the limited source material, Malerman's novel depicts parenthood in a manner that dramatically contrasts McCarthy's novel does and creates the potential for investigating alternate parental strategies.

Chapter four will examine the film adaptation of *Bird Box*, a Netflix production directed by Susanne Bier. In terms of narrative structure and plot progression, there are significant creative changes that alter the family dynamic and modifies the parental strategies. Here, I will evaluate how the family unit changes with the inclusion of a new member, and how it arguably enforces a more prominent thematic investigation on childhood during a post-apocalyptic time. The new member adds a new parental strategy, storytelling, a tactic that operates as a catalyst for arguments, a method to reconnect and way for the mother figure, Malorie, to embrace her motherhood.

In the final chapter, I will discuss the concept of 'embodied hope of children,' which I argue to be the result of successful parental strategies. Here, I will evaluate three prominent features the children (in both novels/films) display; survival adaptability, compassion/empathy, and wonder/curiosity for the future. Each of these three points primarily fulfils Maslow's three main categories of the hierarch of needs, from basic, psychological and self-fulfilment. This chapter will conduct a comparative analysis of the children to build upon the argument that they represent embodied hope and a promise of a future. The conclusion to the thesis will consider the literary and film adaptation investigation and analysis, by answering the following questions: How do the literary parental strategies involve the audience? Which of these encourage or provoke? Both novels, along with their respective film adaptations, depict a post-apocalyptic world with a social upheaval; how do the stories

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<sup>27</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. London: Harper Voyager, 2018.

suggest the reorganization of society to come? These philosophical questions will be placed under scrutiny as part of this thesis' conclusion.

Chapter One Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

When American author Cormac McCarthy published his tenth novel *The Road* in 2006, it quickly gained worldwide attention and positive reviews. McCarthy's book was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, recognizing the excellent and captivating quality of the story. The novel is described as McCarthy's 'most harrowing yet deeply personal work,' as the narrative follows a nameless father and son on the road in the aftermath of an unnamed catastrophe.<sup>28</sup> Descriptions of a grey, charred America mostly habituated by rotten corpses and cannibals, becomes the unstable equilibrium in which the father desperately attempts to not only ensure his son's survival but to maintain his hope while in the face of endless tragedies and an uncertain future.

In this chapter, I will examine the parental strategies utilized by the man to sustain hope. I will evaluate how the father re-establishes a sense of safety, commonly expressed using the word 'okay.' Religious encouragement and motivation are also used as a parental strategy, as the man gave the boy a Christian upbringing and seemingly gives the boy a sense of security and purpose, "knowing" there is a higher deity watching over them. However, the man struggles with his faith, evolving this strategy into a complex and compelling narrative on theodicy and purpose. Furthermore, the man utilizes elemental encouragements by building up their family's sense of purpose, such as by arguing that they are 'carrying the fire,' a quotation that reflects not only their fighting spirit but tender, and unwavering empathy for the people they meet. Lastly, I will address how the man prepares the boy for the future through his encouragement to 'take the gun,' gradually instilling the boy with a self-defence awareness.

**Re-establishing sense of safety**

'They sat on the steps and looked over the country. There's no one here, the man said. Okay. Are you still scared? Yes. We're okay. Okay.'<sup>29</sup>

One of the most important responses in the aftermath of a tragedy is to re-establish a sense of safety by making the children feel seen and protected. It is important to establish a safety net for the child to fall back on to soften the potential traumatic blow of intrusive symptoms following a dangerous event. This part of the chapter will examine how the man attempts to create a safe environment in the core family unit to maintain a foundational

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<sup>28</sup> "The Road." CormacMcCarthy.com. <https://www.cormacmccarthy.com/works/the-road/>.

<sup>29</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 218

framework of protection and well-being. This parental strategy is present in the very first dialogue between the two characters as the boy wakes in the morning, saying ‘hi Papa’, to which the man responds, ‘I’m right here.’ This dialogue interaction of a mere five words quickly establishes the man’s efforts to assure the boy’s sense of safety. Additionally, it becomes clear that the boy is adjusted to his approach as he responds, ‘I know.’<sup>30</sup> The son wakes in the morning to a re-assurance that he is not alone, and his father is present, which serves as an instant reminder of being under his protection.

A significant element of re-establishing a sense of safety in this novel is expressed through the word ‘okay.’ It functions as a tool to drive the conversation between the man and boy forward – typically towards establishing a sense of safety through clear dialogue. The word is expressed approximately 195 times throughout the novel, and with few exceptions (such as dialogue with an older man, who calls himself Ely), is mainly exchanged between the two main characters. This word serves many dialogical purposes, but it functions mostly as an approach to a complicated conversation (often concerning morality) or as a single-word affirmation phrase, establishing emotional encouragement.

Some examples include discussions about their mortality and death, which includes their first dialogue about death to the man explaining the long process of starvation, that they will be okay.<sup>31</sup> The man does not hide the threat of starvation, but engages the topic in an informative and re-assuring approach by directly addressing the issue. Okay also functions as a conversational signposting indicating the reach of an agreement, such as when they discuss cannibalism. In the conversation, the boy explicitly asks if they would ever eat people, to which the man responds ‘no of course not [...] No matter what,’ and the discussion ends with the boy uttering ‘okay.’<sup>32</sup> Lastly, the word is used to reach an agreement after arguments, where the man would ask whether the boy is talking (to him), to which the boy eventually responds ‘okay.’<sup>33</sup> In conclusion, the word functions as a quick and efficient way of communication between the two characters as they navigate through difficult conversations concerning morality or to make amends after a disagreement. ‘Okay,’ however, is not only used in complicated dialogue, but it also occurs regularly as an element of affirmation, emotional encouragement, and support.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p 3-4

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p 9 & 106-7

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p 136

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p 53, 80, 98 & 286-288



The first time the word is surfaces is not during an incident involving immediate danger, it occurs on page four while they are wandering through the woods, and the man asks, ‘are you okay?’ to which the boy nods back.<sup>34</sup> The word is utilized in a way to maintain a regular assurance and dialogue, which later in the narrative, develops into emotional support establishing safety. There is a chain of scenes that illustrates this point; when the man asks if it is okay that they enter his childhood home, and during an earthquake, when he assures the boy everything will be ‘okay,’ when the man ensures the boy it is okay to have nightmares.<sup>35</sup> The phrase itself stands as a constant amidst the chaos, effectively functioning as a reminder that the boy is not alone.

It is worth highlighting the transitional quality and purposes the word undergoes by comparing its first and last occurrence between the man and the boy. Introductory, the phrase is used by the man to ensure the wellbeing of the boy; it is a rather mundane scene that is easy to overlook. The last time the phrase is used, it is the son who expresses it to the man on his deathbed. After exchanging their final goodbyes, the father struggles to talk as it makes him cough. The boy steps into the caring role by comforting his father, telling him, ‘it’s okay, Papa. You don’t have to talk. It’s okay.’<sup>36</sup> In the transitional scene of the father’s death, the boy focuses on the father’s wellbeing and utilizes the same approach of emotional encouragement, down to the same phrase. It may be interpreted as the re-establishing sense of safety reaching a full arch or circle, or perhaps a coming-of-age tale as the boy is now left to himself. Either way, his father’s teachings help the boy navigate the first conversation with a stranger who invites him to his group, where the phrase okay is coincidentally used to reach agreements.

Concerning Bowenian theory, this specific interaction operating as a parental strategy does not appear to fit neatly with one of Bowen’s eight concepts. In her book, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, Roberta M. Gilbert suggests that ‘anxiety, whatever its trigger, is additive’, and therefore ‘the more triggers, the higher the anxiety level rises.’<sup>37</sup> In McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world, there is an overall high-anxiety-level, due to the significant number of anxiety triggers. Some of these triggers are due to natural causes or disasters, starvation, firestorms, earthquakes, or the fear of freezing to death in the upcoming winter. These triggers

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p 4

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p 25, 28 & 36

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p 299

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: a New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group*. Lake Frederick, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2013. p 9

only depict parts of the threat, as the family must also avoid being caught by a cannibalism cult or have all their possessions and food stolen by thieves. As anxiety is, according to Gilbert, additive, it can cause severe damaged if it is not treated or addressed in some way.

However, the man actively checks up on the boy and invites the boy to talk about what they have seen, faced or survived, and effectively relieves some of that tension. The use of ‘okay’ assist in navigating the man and the boy complicated conversations. Mortality and death are prominent themes in the book, and the family is close to starvation several times throughout the novel. While the boy is affected by the unforgiving environment, and at times struggles to start a conversation. However, the man is persistent, as illustrated in the following conversation: ‘Do you think I would lie to you? *No*. But you think I might lie to you about dying? *Yes*. Okay, I might. But we’re not dying. *Okay*.’<sup>38</sup> Here, it seems that the man wants to counter the boy’s experience of nihilism or fear of death by introducing a conversation. This interaction supposedly assists in the movement of anxiety, which in this case, is more “positive” in nature, as it may relieve some of the tension from the boy. Notably, this conversation, too, is wrapped up with the key phrase ‘okay.’

The use of okay effectively functions as a signposting, reaching an agreement and as an emotional encouragement ensuring their safety. It creates a regular dialogue between the man and the boy as they navigate their way through tremendously challenging moral and physical territory. This approach towards re-establishing a sense of safety, this thesis argues, is the cornerstone of their open and raw relationship, which in turn creates a foundation to build the rest of the parental strategies.

### **Religious motives and imagery.**

‘He knew that the child was his warrant. He said: if he is not the word of God God never spoke.’<sup>39</sup>

The citation above illustrates arguably the first parental strategy, the use of religious motifs, and encouragement. Many readers and literary critics alike have taken notice of these thematic elements in McCarthy’s haunting novel, and particularly the quote has been discussed in detail by literary critics and philosophers alike.<sup>40</sup> Here, the man, and the narrator

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<sup>38</sup>Here, the italics are used to emphasize when the boy speaks

<sup>39</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Page 3

<sup>40</sup> Wielenberg, Erik J.. “God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” (2010). Accessed Jan 27 2020. <http://kmckean.myteachersite.com/teacher/files/documents/god,%20morality,%20and%20meaning.pdf> Skrimshire, Stefan. ““There Is No God and We Are His Prophets”: Deconstructing Redemption in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 15, no. 1 (2011): 1–14.

of this novel up until the final pages, draws a direct link between God and his son, insinuating that he is the voice of God. Interestingly, only a few sentences earlier, and, in the same scene, the man describes the morning landscape as ‘godless.’<sup>41</sup> This part of the chapter will investigate how the man utilizes religious faith and imagery to sustain hope. Most parental strategies illustrate how parents may enforce positive behaviour, values, or development in children. Meanwhile, the strategy is conflicting, as the man appears to struggle with his faith.

Before continuing this discussion, it is necessary to establish which religion the man assumedly belongs. McCarthy alludes to a monotheistic religion, as there are frequent references to a single God, emphasized by the capital letter.<sup>42</sup> Initially, one might draw a connection to Catholicism, as McCarthy was brought up a Catholic by his Irish-American family, and in an exclusive interview with Oprah Winfrey revealed how his relationship with his son, and their conversations, was the inspiration the main characters. In fact, some of the dialogue was transferred directly into the manuscript.<sup>43</sup> However, the author, although profoundly religious, does not avow any particular religion.<sup>44</sup> There is a reference to the Book of Job from the old testament, ‘curse God and die,’ a religious text that is utilized by Catholics and Protestants alike. Therefore, it establishes that the man in McCarthy’s novel holds Christian faith and worldview.

Firstly, it is essential to unpack further how the religious themes initially surface in the literary narrative and how it quickly establishes the internal conflict. The first mention of a higher deity is in the description of a landscape as ‘barren, silent, godless.’<sup>45</sup> The base of the word which contributes its meaning lies in ‘god’ (referred to as a morpheme in linguistic studies) paired with ‘-less,’ effectively introducing the story in an equilibrium the narrator deems without a god. As earlier mentioned, the man subsequently creates a link between God and his son. Here McCarthy constructs the image of a man facing a personal crisis through mourning the wavering state of his faith. Furthermore, there is a scene where the man displays clear frustration and outrage towards his God;

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2011.525099>.

To name a few...

<sup>41</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 2

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p 3

<sup>43</sup> “Oprah's Exclusive Interview with Cormac McCarthy Video.” Oprah.com.

<http://www.oprah.com/oprahbookclub/oprah-exclusive-interview-with-cormac-mccarthy-video>.

<sup>44</sup> “Cormac McCarthy: Clinging to Hope in a Devastated World.” MercatorNet, May 12, 2017.

<https://www.mercatornet.com/mobile/view/cormac-mccarthy-clinging-to-hope-in-a-devastated-world>.

<sup>45</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 2

He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.<sup>46</sup>

Here, the man seemingly falls into a complicated pit of emotions. The man who works tirelessly towards protecting his son's innocence, empathy, and hope, who directly links his son with the voice a higher deity, faces an internal conflict so tremendous he even visualizes the physical appearance of God in search of a way to harm. The act of throttling, in other words strangling, the higher power he once sought comfort and guidance in, gives insight to the man's desperation and agony. The man questions if his god has a soul, which in and of itself is a damning question as the importance of the soul in Christianity cannot be understated. Primarily since Jesus himself taught his disciples that the soul is worth more than the rest of the world, as it is your soul that will live on in eternity. Interestingly, the description is followed by the repetition of 'oh God,' further builds on the complex display of his belief. It leaves room for interpretation as the reader is unsure if this part of the dialogue might indicate regret towards his vengeful notions, a moment of relief after having expressed his deepest emotions, or perhaps only a reflection of speechlessness. McCarthy thoroughly explores the complexity of theodicy, why an almighty, good, and all-knowing God permits evil.

McCarthy directly links to this issue by utilizing a biblical quote, right after the man and his boy narrowly escape a cannibal lair and is close to being discovered. It reads 'curse God and die', which is a direct citation from the Book of Job.<sup>47</sup> Job, who once was a wealthy man, witness the downfall of his wealth, the loss of his children, and consequently his health. As a result, Job suffers tremendous emotional and physical pain and begins to lose his faith. Job's wife then infamously tells him to 'Curse God and die!', effectively encouraging him to commit blasphemy and end his life.<sup>48</sup> This biblical reference is a clear indication of the man's struggles with his faith in *The Road*, who mourns the loss of similar proportions. However, the man arguably clings to his faith to give himself and his son a sense of purpose. Arguably, it evolves into a parental strategy for sustaining hope.

To illustrate, after they harrowingly escape an enemy attack, during which the man kills an attacker who threatens his boy with a knife, the man takes a moment to reflect on his

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p 10

<sup>47</sup> "Job 2, English Standard Version 2016 (ESV): The Bible App." Accessed May 9, 2020. <https://www.bible.com/no/bible/59/JOB.2.ESV>.

<sup>48</sup> Smith. "Curse God and Die." Banner of Truth USA, August 15, 2003. <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2003/curse-god-and-die/>.

motivations. The man tells the boy, ‘my job is to take of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?’<sup>49</sup> It is not only the first dialogue about God, but it is also a staggeringly important one. It justifies the man’s murder of another human being, as it was not only the act of self-defence, but it was carried out by God’s will. This statement also substantiates the existence of God, despite the catastrophic natural landscape, and traumatizing environment. It alludes to the presence of a higher deity that is still present through their actions, and it gives them a sense of purpose to continue the extreme physical and emotional journey they endure on the road. The man is seemingly aware of the positive influence of God, as he continuously shields the boy of his doubt.

There is a religious paradox struggle throughout the novel. Such as when the boy remarks that it’s snowing, the man notably catches a snowflake in his hand and ‘watch it expire there like the last host of Christendom.’<sup>50</sup> Or the earlier mentioned scene in which the man envisions himself strangling God.<sup>51</sup> Paradoxically, the man only shares his contradicting thoughts with the reader, such as when he watches the boy as he tends to the fire, by describing him ‘God’s own fire-drake’ the man equates the boy to the image of God.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, in another scene where the man ‘stroked [his son’s] pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god’, he continues to build on his image of his son as a higher deity, giving him a purpose.<sup>53</sup> It effectively serves as a religious parental strategy as it serves as a sense of purpose, it serves as a comfort in the darkest times and, although flawed, it gives the man a reason to keep going. As the man thinks to himself, ‘the boy was all that stood between him and death.’, it is clear that he considers his only purpose in life to be to protect his son and prepare him for the future.<sup>54</sup>

The man’s complicated relationship to God undergoes scrutiny when he encounters an older man on the road, who calls himself Ely. His name might refer to the biblical figure Eli, the high priest and judge of Israel, who at the end of his life was an almost blind, ninety-year-old man, whose sons fought in the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines.<sup>55</sup> In the end, his ‘sinful sons’ die in battle, as an indirect result of his failed parenthood, and the

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<sup>49</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007 Page. 80

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p 15

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p 10

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p 31

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p 78

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p 29

<sup>55</sup> “BibleGateway.” Eli - All the Men of the Bible - Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-men-bible/Eli>.

enemies take the Ark of God, a chest that held tablets that were engraved with the Ten Commandments, a symbol of God's presence and faith.<sup>56</sup> Ely, however, reveals that it is not, in fact, his real name, but for the sake of clarity, I will refer to him by his fake name, rather than shift between the man and the older man.

Returning to the novel, the man struggles with his relationship with God, which leads him to discuss the matter with Ely. Here, Bowen's theory would describe the interaction as a triangulation, a concept that refers to a three-person relationship system between the man, Ely, and God. It is common that when 'two people become anxious, they triangle in a third,' which is why the man's complicated relationship to God makes him resort to discussing the matter with a third party. This specific triangle, however, is abstract in its construction, as the man and Ely consider the mere existence of God, a higher deity that may or may not be real. The topic of God is troublesome, as accepting his existence also means accepting that God appears to allow catastrophes, have evil to rule, and therefore severely traumatize not only the man but his innocent son. Throughout the narrative, there has been a paradox of contradicting religious descriptions and motives, operating as a parental strategy as much as an outlet for frustration and desperation, and it appears that Ely influences the man to, if not abandon, lay his belief to rest.

To illustrate, when the man mentions God, Ely says that 'there is not God, and we are his prophets.'<sup>57</sup> It appears that the man does not know how to respond, and changes the subject, temporarily evading the discussion. Ely creates a counterpoint to the emotionally intimate and optimistic dialogue between the man and boy, as his actions contrasting the ones of the protagonists by not being grateful, not wishing them luck, or asking personal questions. Joseph Altnether, who has a Master's degree in English Literature, points out how Ely's comments indicate that he believes that 'the world is devoid of hope' and that the character 'presents an angry, indifferent attitude to mask the pain and hurt that has engulfed him.'<sup>58</sup> It is difficult to determine the depth and complexity of Ely's personal struggle, one that led to the loss of his faith. However, an interesting element to this discussion, is how Ely tells the man that he 'knew this was coming... This or something like it,' while it is not specified, he alludes to the concept of the end-of-the-world scenario or a natural catastrophe.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps his natural

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<sup>56</sup> Jarus, Owen. "What Is the Ark of the Covenant?" LiveScience. Purch, March 6, 2019. <https://www.livescience.com/64932-the-ark-of-the-covenant.html>.

<sup>57</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 181

<sup>58</sup> "Ely in *The Road*: Description, Significance, & Quotes." Study.com. June 13, 2017. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/ely-in-the-road-description-significance-quotes.html>.

<sup>59</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 179

pessimism prepared him in some way and therefore has less trouble letting go of his faith. There is a significant literary contrast to the man, who places his son against the image of God, and partly convinces himself that his son is a higher deity.

All these factors, from Ely's pessimism to the man's paradox of a religious belief, is what makes their interaction, and the Bowen triangle, so complicated. Triangles are traditionally constructed to solve an issue, to minimize the unnecessary transference of anxiety, which in this case is built to debate the existence of God, and whether he lives through the boy. However, as the existence of God is rooted in the individual's belief, it becomes a task that is, perhaps, unsolvable, as it is all dependent on personal faith. There is a clear distinction between the man and Ely, as it is arguable, that Ely's internal struggle does not lie in the loss of his faith, but rather the loss of his faith in humanity, to illustrate this concept, it is written:

[The man asks] what if I said that [the boy is] a god? The old man shook his head. I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant [sic] live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone. They will? Sure they will. Better for who? Everybody.<sup>60</sup>

This interaction has a lasting effect on the man, as he never again brings up God or religious imagery. Indeed, it surfaces only when the son mentions God in the few pages of the novel, and even then, it is to highlight how he attempts to speak to God but prefers to talk to his father.<sup>61</sup> It appears that the triangulation between the man, Ely, and God did not solve a larger philosophical pondering on the existence of a higher deity, as much as it dissolves it. The man accepts the loss of his faith so he can focus on the relationship with his son in the limited time he has left. One may never fully confirm or deny the existence of a god. However, one can sustain morality by protecting humanity by encouraging positive changes and a fighting spirit.

### **The elemental encouragement of "carrying the fire"**

Is it real? The fire?

Yes (*sic*) it is.

Where is it? I dont (*sic*) know where it is.

Yes (*sic*) you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p 183

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p 306

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p 298

Fire holds many meanings in Cormac McCarthy's haunting novel. It is the element that caused destruction and firestorm, leaving the remainder of America in a haze of grey. The ashes are a product of the burnings of buildings, trees, corpses, or crops, and in turn, creates an element of walking through the destruction. It leaves behind a cruel and unforgiving world in which the few survivors mourn the loss of their loved ones, society's protection /order, human decency, and purpose while hiding from the grasp of "blood cults" (cannibals) and other who prey on the weak. Fire is also the element that sustains life, as the father and his son light a bonfire most nights, while seeking shelter from the cold, unforgiving winter that has caught up with them. However, these qualities merely scratch the surface of the actual influence this element holds. Indeed, the father constructs a parental strategy based on elemental encouragement by coining the phrase 'carrying the fire.'<sup>63</sup> It is a phrase that evolves into a mantra that helps them maintain a sense of focus, humanity, and empathetic purpose. The pages to follow will investigate how this concept works as a parental strategy, and analyse the meaning behind 'carrying the fire.'

The first time the phrase is mentioned occurs the day after the father and son harrowingly escape the attack from a cannibal, that leads them to desperately flee through the woods in the dark and lose all their rations. Despite starvation and recent trauma, the boy refuses to eat a passing dog and wakes in the night, reflecting that '[they] are going to be okay [...] because [they are] carrying the fire.'<sup>64</sup> The first mention of the expression emerges after they have encountered a moral dilemma; how far are they willing to go to ensure their survival? What ethical codes are they ready to break? How much of their humanity are they willing to sacrifice? It is strongly suggested that the answer to these questions lies in this very phrase and what it embodies. Paul Patton, a professor of philosophy, made many interesting observations concerning the true meaning of carrying the fire. He suggests that 'at the heart of *The Road* is the story of the father's effort to imbue his son with the most rudimentary elements of a moral code.'<sup>65</sup> Arguably, the phrase stands as a reminder of living virtuously by not resorting to cannibalism, theft, or other actions that may damage their humanity, and consequently, the purity of their souls (which holds significant importance in Christianity).

Patton further suggests that carrying the fire is associated with the child's conviction that nothing bad will happen to them, arguing that the belief with being 'the good guys' is

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p 87

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p 87

<sup>65</sup> Paul Patton, «McCarthy's Fire,» In *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy's The Road*. Ed. By Murphet, Julian. 2012. p 138



explicitly linked to the existence of God.<sup>66</sup> While this observation creates an interesting foundation from which Patton draws links to the teachings of Nietzsche and Kant, there is more evidence to suggest that the religious belief belongs to the man. The link Patton refers to is created by the man; it does not necessarily reflect the boy's views. It is vital to separate the religious experience of these characters, between the man who secretly mourns the loss of his God and the boy's newly established relationship to God through the teachings of his parental figure. The link between carrying the fire and being "the good guys" may hold significant relevance with the existence of the soul. Catastrophe has struck them, however by maintaining their humanity and morals they ensure the purity of their souls, granting them a pass through the pearly gates of heaven if that applies to their faith. The man directly touches upon this subject when the man must decide if he is capable of killing his son to protect him from being raped and slaughtered at the hands of cannibals. It reads, 'What if [the gun] doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? [...] Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick.'<sup>67</sup> The man's teachings may have been motivated by the survival of the boy's soul, rather than his physical body, or vessel. Perhaps to ensure his place in the rapture, which is a concept and belief that both living and dead believers' souls will ascend to heaven to meet Jesus Christ at the Second Coming.<sup>68</sup> This notion, however, is most prominent in the man's belief.

However, the boy's morality does not appear to exist as an extension of his father's belief system. Instead, he treats the concept of morality as something that holds universal importance regardless of the existence of a god. The boy's virtue is created and sustained through the teachings of and relationship with his father, not one with a higher deity. This notion is reflected in the final pages of the novel, as it is written; '[The boy] tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget.'<sup>69</sup> This very line emphasizes the real source of his morality, traced back to the relationship with his father. Hence, while the man implied that carrying the fire held religious implications, the son seemingly adapts a more humanitarian view. The core morality behind either worldview is universal, therefore enforcing its impact as a parental strategy. While the phrase may hold spiritual qualities for the man, it is not interpreted that way by his son. The concept of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p 138

<sup>67</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 120

<sup>68</sup> Stefon, Matt. "The Rapture." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., October 26, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rapture-the>.

<sup>69</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 306

carrying the fire is acquired and developed by the man, then transferred to his son, who understands it as a moral compass.

The morality traits of carrying the fire also entail a deep sense of empathy, which is frequently displayed by the boy throughout the narrative. While the man is naturally more cautious towards strangers, knowing what evil men may perform in these times, the boy holds on to his childlike innocence and experiences a deep sense of empathy towards those they meet on the road. To illustrate, when they meet a stranger who has been struck by lightning, and the boy begs his father to help him or offer food, another point is when the boy sees a little boy (who runs away) and asks his father to share some of their food with him. Here we witness a clear drive of empathy, as the boy is willing to spare some of his minimal rations to mere strangers. Furthermore, when they come across a hidden bunker filled with a considerable amount of food, that the man describes as ‘the richness of a vanished world,’ the boy is hesitant on whether they should take it since it belonged to someone else.<sup>70</sup> The boy does not set his needs above others; instead, he considers it on par with them.

This point is especially evident when they have to chase down a thief who has stolen all their belongings, including their rations and blankets, and the man loses his temper. It is the second time the man aims the gun at a stranger on the road, and the previous encounter resulted in a shot fired in self-defence that killed a cannibal and forcing them to flee from a larger group that attempts to hunt them down. In this instance, however, the man has the upper hand, aiming a gun at him, as the thief is alone holding a knife. The risk of losing all their rations, which would likely result in their deaths, affects the man who demands revenge by not only retrieving their belongings but ordering the thief to undress ‘every goddamned stitch,’ while the boy protests.<sup>71</sup> Here, we see a moment of weakness for the man, who has remained cautious but just to strangers they have met on the road. This scene is a pivotal moment, as the boy emerges as the voice of reason as well as the voice of compassion and convinces the father to return the thief’s clothes and offer a can of food.

The concept of carrying the fire encapsulates not only morality and empathy but a fighting spirit – an essential skill required to survive the endless stream of emotional and physical trauma. This fighting spirit also entails doing the right thing when put under a significant amount of external and internal pressure. It is a multifaceted phrase, encapsulating

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p 148

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. P 274

critical skills and a mindset. It is the boy's somewhat naïve compassion, balanced out by the man's many teachings and warnings to avoid the 'bad guys,' that creates a momentum and results in the boy's forward-looking, realistic and stubborn optimism.

**Instilling self-defence awareness:**

'He took the boy's hand and pushed the revolver into it...If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me?'<sup>72</sup>

The man spends significant time to ensure the boy's wellbeing, through the use of "okay" and the elemental encouragement of 'carrying the fire,' however, he must also prepare his son for the future through self-defence and vigilance, such as by teaching him how to use the gun. It contrasts the previous strategies designed to reduce the boy's experience of anxiety, fear, or loneliness, as the man must teach the boy self-defence and prepare him for the future. The last parental strategy that is more controversial, as it directly involves giving the boy instructions on how to end his own life. The gun presents a promise of a quick escape and a chance to keep the dignity of life until circumstances no longer allow it.

The gun does not merely operate as a prop or a firearm; it has a significant literary impact on the story and its family unit at the centre. In Jamie Crosswhite's article '*Carry the Fire*': *McCarthy's Bullets as Shells of Life in a Post-Apocalyptic World*,' he makes an interesting observation on the correlation between the bullets and each member of the family. He argues that: 'each of the bullets has a direct correlation to the life of one family member: three bullets, three pieces of the family. As each bullet is relinquished, a member of the family is sacrificed,' and finally concludes 'we are left with one bullet and one child who must "keep the gun with [him] at all times" so that his life might continue; he must "carry the fire."<sup>73</sup> However, this section of the chapter will explore how the gun is utilized as a part of a parental strategy, as the father must instil vigilance and self-defence awareness in his son to prepare him for the future when the father is no longer with him.

Throughout the novel, we see a gradual transformation in the boy, who initially objects to carrying the gun and whose naïve optimism poses a danger to his safety, to willingly carrying the firearm and approaching strangers with vigilance. Due to McCarthy's construction of the book, many narrative gaps invites discussion. Narrative gaps are the space between what the narration reveals and the underlying story. It is up for interpretation, and it

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p 119

<sup>73</sup> Crosswhite, Jamie. "Carry the Fire": McCarthy's Bullets as Shells of Life in a Post-Apocalyptic World." *The Explicator* 69, no. 3 (2011): 146-49. p 148

encourages the reader to engage with the material. To illustrate, in *The Road*, it is not a scene where the man initially teaches the boy how to operate the gun, it is instead referred back to through the father saying to the son: 'you know how to do it.'<sup>74</sup> This interaction suggests that the man has instructed the boy prior, and alludes to the possibility of several discussions where the man teaches the boy about the importance of self-defence. Additionally, it shows how the reader only has access to a portion of their conversations, not the complete transcript.

The boy's display of personal growth is prominent, as one examines this transition through the chronological sequence of scenes. The first time the man instructs the boy to hold the gun, it occurs after hiding from a group of cannibals, and the man fired a shot in self-defence, killing a marauder. The boy protests, saying, 'I dont [sic] want the gun' to which the father firmly responds, 'I didnt [sic] ask you if you wanted it. Take it.'<sup>75</sup> The next time the father instructs the boy to take the gun, they are hiding in the bushes nearby a cannibal lair and are close to being caught when the man hastily reminds the boy how to operate the gun and commit suicide. The man frequently asks the boy if he understands, who confirms; however the boy's facial expression betrays him since when the man looks at the boy 'all he saw was terror,' and the man keeps the gun himself.<sup>76</sup> These scenes show the boy's initial fear and confusion and how those emotions triggered by holding the gun.

Halfway through the novel, a definite turning point takes place as the father is brutally honest and encourages the boy's fighting spirit. This specific scene occurs when they have no rations and are nearing starvation, which forces them to investigate a door leading to an underground bunker. McCarthy writes:

This door looks like the other door, he said. But it's not. I know you're scared. That's okay. I think there may be things in there and we have to take a look. There's no place else to go. This is it. I want you to help me. If you dont [sic] want to hold the lamp you'll have to take the pistol.

I'll hold the lamp.

Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont [sic] give up.

Okay.<sup>77</sup>

In this scene, the boy is affected by their traumatic encounter at the cannibal lair, in which they discovered a basement filled with prisoners, some of who were missing limbs, and the man attempts to counter the boy's anxiety by instilling a fighting spirit and grit towards being 'the good guys.' Luckily, their determination and bravery paid off, as this bunker is

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<sup>74</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 119

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p 73

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p 119

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p 145

filled with food, rations, and supplies to last them for months. Following this interaction, one can begin to make out a change in the boy's attitude, from fear to discomfort, which is a small, but a tremendously crucial first step of his progression.

The boy displays a critical skill of survival adaptability, as he grows more accustomed to holding the gun. To illustrate, when the man gives the boy the gun to investigate an abandoned train, the son suggests 'you take it papa,' to which the man responds, 'no, that's not the deal. Take it,' and that is the end of the discussion.<sup>78</sup> When the man hands the gun to investigate a boat, the boy does not object but asks his father what he is going to do.<sup>79</sup> This transition, from fear to acceptance, occurs gradually, and the boy grows familiar with the habit of holding the pistol. When the father is dying, he offers the boy some final words of wisdom as he says: 'keep the gun with you at all times. You need to find the good guys but you cant [sic] take any chances.' After the man's death, the story shifts its perspective to the boy who has 'the pistol in his hand.'<sup>80</sup> The boy displays no sign of fear or discomfort. He is instead following his father's advice and carries the gun without hesitation as if the boy considers it a new habit.

The boy's encounter with the veteran displays his personal growth as he approaches the stranger with vigilance. Initially, the construction of the texts misleads the reader, as it appears that the boy is openly talking with the man, which is a direct result of the narrative gaps. However, further into the conversation when the veteran asks the boy to put the pistol away, saying: 'I dont [sic] want your pistol. I just dont [sic] want you pointing it at me.'<sup>81</sup> Here, the boy's self-defence is shown through dialogue rather than description and illustrates how the father has succeeded in instilling the boy's self-defence awareness. Another critical point here, when asked to put down the gun, the boy says that he is 'not supposed to let anyone take the pistol. No matter what,' it is a display of his growth and change of attitude to bear arms.

As a parental strategy, this approach, while not strictly a Bowenian concept, does tap into the differentiation scale. Initially, the boy showed signs of higher anxiety levels, as he tends to become overwhelmed by emotions that would cloud his decision making or sometimes even sabotage his articulation. Such as when he and his father were in the cannibal lair, and the boy discovers a group closing in on the house, and he appears to panic as he was

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p 190

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p 238

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p 301

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p 302

‘doing his little dance of terror,’ without being able to utter a word.<sup>82</sup> Bowen argues that ‘lower scale people are more vulnerable to stress and, for them, recovery from symptoms can be slow or impossible, while higher scale people tend to recover rapidly.’<sup>83</sup> This Bowenian theory may explain the boy’s transition, who struggles to recover from their experience discovering a cannibal lair, so when the man wants to investigate an underground bunker, the boy protests and McCarthy’s description paints a clear image of the boy’s terror. It is written;

He had his fists clutched at his chest and he was bobbing up and down with fear... [the man] tried to explain to the boy that there was no one buried in the yard but the boy just started crying.<sup>84</sup>

This scene shows how the boy experiences overwhelming levels of anxiety and even physical symptoms, such as the shaking and restlessness, hence why it is vital that the man prepares him for the future by teaching him the importance of vigilance and self-defence. His father’s teachings focus on the significance of ‘carrying the fire,’ as that is ‘what the good guys do. They keep trying.’ As a result, the boy displays signs of a higher differentiation level, as he, at the end of the novel, is no longer overwhelmed by anxiety to the brink of immobility, and therefore faces the veteran with a calm vigilance, ‘pistol in hand.’<sup>85</sup> This parental strategy is irreplaceable, as it allows the boy to face the grim future with a more balanced mindset and is no longer as quickly susceptible to spiking levels of anxiety. By acquiring a higher level of differentiation, the boy may live on to ‘carry the fire.’

The father utilizes a diverse combination of parental strategies to prepare his son for the future. His teachings include establishing a sense of safety, using religious thematic elements like motivation, taps into a moral code, and fighting spirit through the phrase ‘carrying the fire’ and instils a vigilant attitude in the boy by teaching him the importance of self-defence and carrying the pistol. It is a delicate balance between relieving the boy’s experience of trauma while also prepare him for an unforgiving world. The story has a significant emotional impact due to its direct inspiration from Cormac McCarthy’s relationship with his son, John Francis, and some of the man and boy’s conversations are, in fact, a direct transcript of those of McCarthy and John. As a novel, it gives a gripping insight into the deep love between a father and son, contrasting the grim, vicious world, and cults that threaten them.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p 117

<sup>83</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. (Aronson: 1985, New York) p 472

<sup>84</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 142-143

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p 301

In closing, I want to draw attention to the man's subtle use of elemental encouragement, particularly since it does not appear to have been written about prior. This chapter examined four of the most prominent parental strategies; however, there are still a significant number of memorable scenes, showing the man's constant search for ways to inspire and protect. One of these reads as follows:

There was a sharp crack somewhere on the mountain. Then another. It's just a tree falling, he said. It's okay. The boy was looking at the dead roadside trees. It's okay, the man said. All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us. How do you know?  
I just know.<sup>86</sup>

If one interprets this scene in a literal sense, it entails that the man and son must be cautious about their environment. The catastrophe caused all crops and animals to die, and the remaining trees are falling over, often caused or accompanied by an earthquake. However, if one investigates the scene closer, explicitly looking for metaphorical/symbolic associations, it unlocks a possible meaning with a significant impact. After all, a prominent aspect to the catastrophe is how most of humanity has been wiped out: the remainder of humankind are fighting for survival, and some have resorted to cannibalism and actively hunts other survivors. The trees hold a symbolic reference to family trees, such as represented by the father and son. There is a prominent parallel between the destruction of the earth and the death of humankind, as the lack of crops and animals force survivors to look for alternate food sources, leading some desperate groups to cannibalism. Metaphorically, trees fall and knock over more on its way, similarly to how some cannibals are hunting survivors. The death of the family alludes to the end of a family, as symbolically shown as a tree fall.

Returning to the dialogue, when the man says '[the trees are] not [going to fall] on us,' it may tap into survival as well as personal resistance.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, it is perhaps a stubborn resonance determining that their family unit will neither fall victim to other cannibal cults nor to follow their path. It is an active choice, a strong display of personal agency and character, to choose to keep going, keep fighting and be the good guys.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p 35

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p 35

Chapter TwoJohn Hillcoat's *The Road*

The film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel was a close cooperation between the author, director John Hillcoat and screenwriter Joe Penhall, with a focus on capturing the essence of the book.<sup>88</sup> In this chapter, I intend to map out and examine the creative changes made by the screenwriter and director, and how they alter the family dynamic between the man (Viggo Mortensen) and the boy (Kodi Smit-McPhee). Overall, the four prominent strategies have undergone alterations to some degree. Still, the most significant change perhaps lies in the boy's voice, which is more direct and active in its visual depiction. This chapter will investigate the parental strategies in the same order as the literary chapter, from establishing a sense of safety, religious imagery, carrying the fire, and, finally, the utilization of the gun, to determine how the changes have impacted the family unit.

The film's director, John Hillcoat, had previously shown great interest and respect for McCarthy as a writer, and received the unpublished manuscript of *The Road*, to consider for adaptation purposes. On the commentary track on the film, Hillcoat expresses a desire to be 'faithful to the spirit of the book,' while also acknowledging how 'cinema has its own poetic language.'<sup>89</sup> To exemplify, in the first act, Hillcoat and Penhall, includes voiceover, a narration without adding an image of the speaker, to give the audience 'a method of getting inside the man's head the way the novel does.' Additionally, while used sparingly, it quickly establishes vital information about the world, such as the extinction of crops and animals, or the existence of cannibal cults. Here, the filmmakers aim for a delicate balance between transferring and altering the narrative, with a goal stay true to the story while also tailoring it for the visual medium.

Concerning film adaptation theory, Geoffrey Wagner suggests dividing adaptations into categories, and this particular adaptation falls under the first one, describing one transposition 'in which the screen version sticks closely to the literary source, with a minimum interference.'<sup>90</sup> However, as pointed out by George Bluestone, 'changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium,' hence creating a

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<sup>88</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD

**Note:** As Chicago referencing does not require time stamps, I will only refer to the film source once.

<sup>89</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. Director's commentary. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD

<sup>90</sup> Cartmell, Deborah, and Imelda Whelehan. *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.p 5



foundation for comparative analysis, to examine how the parental strategies have are modified.<sup>91</sup>

### **Re-establishing a sense of safety; ‘Yes, I am! I am the one! Okay?’**

As a result of adaptation, establishing a sense of safety signposted by the word “okay” has been noticeably reduced, the number of occurrences reduced from the novel’s original 195 to the film’s 37. However, this is, as Bluestone argues, a natural and expected change, primarily due to the difference in length.<sup>92</sup> Either way, this parental strategy is still a prominent tool utilized throughout the film, after the first flashbacks, cuts to a scene with the man and the boy in a cave. When the boy wakes, he calls out for the father, who embraces him, and the screen turns to black as we hear the man saying, ‘it’s okay. I’m right here.’ This scene is an example in which ‘okay’ is added to scenes in the film’s adaptation, as the same opening scene in McCarthy’s novel, the man only says, ‘I’m right here.’ The phrase ‘okay’ is added in scenes that initially did not contain it, such as when the man rinses blood out of the boy’s hair, or he shows the boy how to use the gun. Albeit, this is not in its original depiction, this creative change maintains the presence of the phrase and, therefore, its impact.

There is an example where the addition of ‘okay’ changes the mood and impact of the scene. This scene occurs when the boy expresses anger towards his father after a confrontation with a thief (Michael Kenneth Williams). This scene is an emotional turning point in the story, as the father, affected by anger and desperation, crosses a moral line, by taking the man’s clothes and shoes. The man defends his actions, arguing that the boy is ‘not the one who has to worry about everything’ and in its literary depiction, it is written; ‘[The boy] looked up, his wet and grim face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one.’<sup>93</sup> Kodi Smit-McPhee improvised this scene, as he expresses demanding, frustrated by shouting his lines, and as director Hillcoat describes, lashes out at his father.

Most importantly, when the boy stands up for the thief, who is a stranger, and challenges his father’s moral authority, it illustrates how people are not either ‘the good guys’ or ‘the bad guys,’ it is far more complex. It shows how it all boils down to the individual, and what one chooses to act on, how it is an ongoing process of choices and reactions rather than a set goal. Here, we see the man in a moment of weakness, as he performs, as director Hillcoat

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<sup>91</sup> George Bluestone, *Novels into film*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1952) p 5-6

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 277

describes as ‘almost a tribal punishment,’ when he takes everything from the thief in blind revenge, despite knowing it will likely result in his death. In this specific scene, the boy displays a higher level of differentiation as he does not allow fear or anxiety cloud his judgment like his father and operates as a voice of reason. As the scene is improvised, Viggo displays a genuine surprise by Kodi’s outburst, further building on its emotional impact.

Following the boy’s original line, he adds ‘okay?’ signalling the end of the outburst that drew the line between right from wrong, between self-defence to aggression-infused attack. The way this phrase is articulated is important: it is a clear shift from frustration to compassion, a delicate vulnerability. This tone of voice invites compassion and forgiveness, both for the thief’s actions as well as the man. Here, too, the phrase signposts the end of the disagreement, before the man and the boy return the thief’s clothes and a single can of food. The rations are shown in a close-up shot, before cutting back to the man and the boy, and it is unknown whether the thief ever found them. Nevertheless, true to character, the boy’s actions are not motivated by appreciation from strangers, but rather a sense of justice. Additionally, the combination of the boy’s outburst and his use of ‘okay’ rather than creating a larger sentence such as ‘this is not okay,’ displays Kodi’s understanding of the character and the source material, and how he appears to have great respect for the author’s voice. As a line, ‘this is not okay’ would be redundant, as his anger unmistakably communicates this notion, and therefore the simple “okay” extends the impact of the literary novel.

Overall, as a parental strategy, ‘okay’ still holds a prominent presence in the dialogue, and therefore in the story. However, the creative altercations, initiated by Kodi, to the famous scene with the thief, elevated its impact to the character dynamic, illustrating how the boy is coming of age and actively utilizes his voice to express himself. The strength of its impact lies in its simplicity, as it effectively navigates through difficult conversations and helps establish an agreement, by using only two syllables.

**Religious motivation: ‘If he is not the word of God, then God never spoke.’**

The literary depiction of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is frequently referencing religious imagery; however, its film adaptation presents a story with a significant reduction of religious elements. This change is a clear result of the transition between the man’s literary narration to visual storytelling, especially as the director wanted to refrain from utilizing voiceover as much as possible. However, there are clear creative changes to several scenes, such as the conversation between the man and Ely (Robert Duvall), who discuss God. As a

result, the story is no longer prominent with religious imagery, and it is instead a backdrop, but it is still present.

The religious elements of the story are modified from the start as the man watches his son while we hear Viggo's voiceover, stating, 'If he is not the word of God, then God never spoke.' Here, there is a minor change to the original line, which initially did not contain "then", and yet it changes its impact. This small change invites a discussion on semantics, which entails 'the meanings of words, and particularly with changes in the meaning. It involves, moreover, the study of the relationship between words and things.'<sup>94</sup> In the novel, the quote 'if he is not the word of God God never spoke,' suggests a more "absolute" transition, as if debunking the existence of God altogether.<sup>95</sup> Whereas the film adaptation's minor change to the sentence alters its meaning as by adding "then" suggests a timeline, alluding to how if the boy is not the voice of God, then it confirms God's demise, along with the end of society and a significant portion of humanity. Although it is a minor change overall, it appears to foreshadow how the religious thematic is reduced.

Part of the reason why religion operates as a parental strategy lies in its justification of murder as self-defence, as it sends out a message that it is an act carried out by God's will and that a higher deity is watching over them. In the novel, the man directly states, 'My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you.'<sup>96</sup> The film adaptation alters the scene drastically by removing all thematic lines concerning God. As the man only says the last line, it causes a tremendous change to the character's motivation and theme dynamic. In the literary depiction, the father's reasoning links his actions to God's will. It alludes to the scene being a prominent religious experience, which contrasts his usual expression of mourning the loss of his faith. As a scene, it is a pivotal moment of the narrative, a significant aspect of an intricate depiction of faith in a post-apocalyptic world. When Joe Penhall, the screenwriter, removed the religious elements, it places a greater emphasis on the relationship between the father and son, and how his defence is fundamentally fuelled by a parental instinct; the need to protect your child no matter what.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Cuddon, J.A., and Rafey Habib. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin Reference Library. London: Penguin Books, 2014. p 643

<sup>95</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 3

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p 60

<sup>97</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. Director's commentary. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD

In some ways, one could argue that the removal of religious themes emphasizes the man's actions as a parent, as it taps into a biological nature and cultural responsibility of protecting one's offspring. Overall, Hillcoat's adaptation focuses on the family unit with minimal references to Christianity. This thematic reduction is illustrated when, upon discovering a bunker filled with rations, the son does not wish that those who left it behind are 'safe in heaven with God,' as depicted in the novel. Instead, the boy says, 'thank you for soup... and all this stuff, people,' though, it is worth noting that he places his hands together as if praying – preserving the religious act referencing a prayer.

The conversation between the man and Ely also underwent a change, without removing religion thematics in its entirety. Director John Hillcoat describes the literary character, Ely, as 'strangely... self-conscious,' and argues that it is 'the only scene that felt like it was a book or play.'<sup>98</sup> As a result, he instructs actor Robert Duvall to 'personalize the scene,' to counter this experience and make the conversation flow more naturally.<sup>99</sup> The conversation is condensed down, and Duvall equips his character with more depth by adding backstory and balancing out his cynicism with a display of emotion, loss, and mourning.

In the literary depiction, Ely explains how he thought he was dead, and responds to the man's inquiry if he thought the boy was an angel with a blunt comment, stating; 'I didnt [sic] know what he was. I never thought to see a child again.'<sup>100</sup> The film translates the scene by Ely stating, 'I thought [the boy] was an angel,' and the manner of his articulation is essential, as he appears to become overwhelmed by emotion and trails off. The man responds, 'to me, he's a God,' and preserves the thematic element of the scene. Initially, it seems to contradict Ely's original depiction. However, this delicate, empathic side is built upon with backstory.

While maintaining the character's scepticism towards the man and the boy, Duvall gives another facet to his identity by adding a brief, but captivating background to his role, as he reveals 'I had a boy one time, of my own.' Again, there is an unmistakable shift of focus to the thematic elements of family and of father-son-relationships, moving the religious themes to the background – within reach, but no longer placed under such careful attention. Hillcoat's interpretation of this scene, along with Roberts improvisation, focuses on human interaction, family relations, and loss, and takes a step away from the narrative's original construction.

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<sup>98</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. Director's Commentary. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p 183

<sup>100</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Page 183

The inclusion of the following line further highlights this character change; ‘If there is a God up there, it would have turned its back on us by now. Whoever made humanity will find no humanity here. So beware.’ There is a subtle contradiction here, as Ely stokes the fire, the elemental source that gives them warmth and life, and lastly, how he raises his finger, warning the man and the boy of the death of humanity after he was gifted a meal and shelter by strangers. He is unable to fully identify the kindness and compassion that is shown him by the man and the boy, as a result of his trauma and cynicism. Overall, the creative changes shift the focus from the loss of religion to the loss of humanity, such as Ely losing his son to unknown circumstances, and the man losing his wife to nihilism and suicide. While the conversation is still affected by profound religious topics, their misery and expression are rooted in mourning the loss of their loved ones, or the fear of it.

In conclusion, as a parental strategy, the religious motivation is no longer as prominent and therefore does not carry the same impact as a strategy. However, it does seem to assist the man, as he, similarly to the model, utilizes religious imagery to motivate himself and fuel a sense of purpose amidst all the misery. Arguably, it does benefit the father more directly than the son; however, that does not entirely remove its impact on the father’s motivation.

### **Elemental encouragement: ‘What fire? The fire inside you.’**

In the previous chapter, I examined how the term ‘carrying the fire’ holds many possible meanings: it stands a reminder to live with compassion and vigilance, it sparks a fighting spirit, and it stands as a mantra. In Cormac McCarthy’s novel, the expression was mentioned in five different scenes, whereas Hillcoat’s film adaptation only presents the phrase two times. As a parental strategy, it is more subtle in its depiction; however, the director manages to convey its strong symbolic references.

First, it is useful to point out how the term is first introduced in both depictions of the story. In the novel, it is the boy who brings it up the first time, not too long after their run-in with the marauder, and the boy says, ‘We’re going to be okay...and nothing bad is going to happen to us... because we are carrying the fire.’<sup>101</sup> Based on this piece of dialogue, it is clear that they have previously had conversations containing and defining this phrase, the narrative gaps alluding to more extended discussions on the matter. It is shown that it is indeed a term that they have carried with them for a significant time, a mantra that they frequently revisit when in need. In the film’s depiction, at the same point in the story, the man introduces the

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<sup>101</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Page 87

term. When the man encourages the boy to ‘keep carrying the fire,’ the boy questions the phrase, and the man adds, ‘the fire inside of you.’ Before the scene ends, the boy picks up a stick from the fireplace, studies the flame at its end, and then exchanges a smile with his father. It is a cheerful atmosphere, and this interaction is the catalyst for a fighting spirit and the birthplace for the mantra. As a parental strategy, this initial introduction as insightful as it shows the motivational values, as it is introduced following a traumatic event, that led to a shot fire and the boy covered in a stranger’s blood. By introducing this strategy, he shifts the boy’s focus, from looking back at a traumatic incident to looking ahead, with a hopeful resolution, as shown in the boy’s transition from a frown to a smile.

While the phrase is mentioned nine times in the novel, spanning over five separate scenes, and the film adaptation merely includes two, it does not minimize its impact. It is arguable that the phrase original repetition works in its literary framework, as it embraces a more poetic expression overall. The film, however, operates differently as a medium. As director John Hillcoat expressed a desire not to have ‘too obvious reference[s] to a literary source,’ it sheds light on why the phrase limitedly expressed.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, it is erased from the father’s death scene. Nevertheless, the absence of the word does not sabotage the impact but creates a thematic build-up when mentioned during the boy’s interaction with the veteran (Guy Pearce).

After his father’s passing, the boy meets the veteran and, taking a leap of faith, asks him if he is ‘carrying the fire.’ Although the word was not included in the father’s death scene, the boy illustrates how the man has successfully instilled a vigilance and bravery to find like-minded people, ‘the good guys’ who have made an active choice to live compassionately. As the phrase is only mentioned twice, there is a more prominent transition from the man’s initial introduction of the phrase to the boy’s utilizing it to regroup, essentially becoming a part of a new family.

### **Instilling a self-defence awareness: ‘Two bullets; one for you, one for me... is that okay?’**

The gun holds significance and have a controversial impact on the family unit when the man teaches the boy not only how to operate it, but how to, if necessary, commit suicide. As a vital element to the story, and as part of instilling the boy with a self-defence awareness,

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<sup>102</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. Director’s Commentary. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD

it posed a significant challenge of finding a child actor capable of performing these violent and emotionally traumatic scenes. Director John Hillcoat and Viggo Mortensen supposedly worried about finding someone to play the boy, as the brutality of the scenes imposed an immense pressure on a young actor.<sup>103</sup> Kodi Smith-McPhee showed an exceptional understanding of the plot and expressed, what Hillcoat describes, as a ‘profound emotional maturity.’<sup>104</sup> Overall, the boy's response to the gun is portrayed in a more hesitant, uncomfortable manner, which significantly contrasts the depiction of the novel, where the man must regularly instruct the boy to hold the gun, and who in turn responds with overwhelming fear and protests.

In Hillcoat’s depiction, the first interaction the man and the boy have concerning the gun depicts a scene where the man walks him through how to operate it and, notably, how to commit suicide. A single line of dialogue, ‘just like I showed you,’ conveys that this has been instructed by the man prior. While the audience is not shown the boy’s initial reaction to his father’s suicide instructions, left in a narrative gap, we are shown the boy’s fear and protests, as he whimpers ‘no’ when the man places the gun inside his mouth to illustrate. This scene conveys how death, suicide, and mortality are a natural part of their existence, and how the boy thoroughly struggles to come to terms with the utilization of the gun – as he is yet to identify its real purpose.

Throughout the story, the man directs all his energy to protect and shelter the boy, preserving his innocence and goodwill. Nonetheless, the father is also aware of how his son’s naïve compassion is dangerous, as the ‘bad guys’ will take advantage of his innocence by robbing him of his supplies, rape him or even kill the boy to feast on his body. It is fear of what might be, along with the knowledge of his limited life span as an unnamed illness causes persistent cough and spitting up blood, which forces the man to impose self-defence awareness in the boy. It is a cruel world that is ruled by violence; therefore, the man must teach the boy how to navigate through it.

Similar to the previous parental strategies, this one has also undergone an overall reduction; two prominent scenes are modified. After the run-in with the marauder (Garret Dillahunt), the man instructs the boy to take the gun as he returns to the road to retrieve their possessions. In the novel’s depiction, the boy protests and begs his father to stay, whereas, in

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

its film adaptation, the boy appears to still be in a state of shock as he allows the man to place the gun in his hands without protest. Yet, his lack of objection does not equal acceptance, as the boy holds the gun flat in the palm in his hands and stares at it – meaning he would not have been prepared for an enemy ambush. Here, it is shown how the boy still must learn the “value” of the firearm, or, more accurately, the necessity of self-defence regardless of whether he is equipped with a gun.

There is a significant change to another pivotal scene, illustrating how the boy struggles with using the weapon. When the boy and the man discover a house, a cannibal lair with a basement filled with prisoners, they manage to escape from the building and seek cover in the terrain. The man hastily reminds the boy how to commit suicide as he plans to lead the enemies away, but stays behind when he notices how the boy appears paralyzed by fear.<sup>105</sup> The film’s screenwriter, Joe Penhall, rewrote this scene, and the man and his son end up hiding inside the house’s bathroom, where blood covers the surfaces, and a tool sits beside an overflowing sink. According to the director, this was an intentional modification to make the scene more appropriate for film by ‘raising the stakes,’ as much of the tension would disappear if they escaped too soon.<sup>106</sup> As a result, an intense scene occurs as the man attempts to hand the boy the gun, repeating ‘take the gun,’ and when the boy protests, the man must change his strategy by aiming the gun at his son’s head, to assist him in ending his life before they are found. Luckily, when the prisoners break out from the basement, it gives them sufficient time to escape. The creative changes made to this scene directly enhances its emotional impact and clearly illustrates the father’s sheer desperation in protecting his boy, even if it entails ending his life. In addition, it again shows the boy’s inability to cope with overwhelming emotions or handling the gun.

In the film adaptation's final act, following his father’s death, the boy follows his father’s last instructions by picking up the gun, checking the cylinder for its one bullet, and soon runs into a veteran. As discussed in the previous chapter, it initially unclear whether the boy is displaying a self-defence awareness until the veteran asks the boy not to point the pistol at him, which reveals the boy’s growth as he had supposedly aimed the weapon at the stranger. Due to its visual medium, the film adaptations do not contain the same revelation; nonetheless, it does give a clear depiction of the boy holding the gun; the actor portrays his

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<sup>105</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. p 119

<sup>106</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. Director’s Commentary. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD



initial fear and stresses breathing, as the veteran walks towards him. The boy's body language, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, tense shoulders and fearful eyes, illustrates his discomfort. Still, he aims at the veteran with an unmistakable resolution. Here, we see the apparent result of the father instilling a self-defence awareness in the boy, that allows him to face the veteran.

John Hillcoat's *The Road* presented many alterations to the scenes, while also preserving the original story by aiming to be 'faithful to the spirit of the book.' The parental strategies identified in the literary novel were all, to a degree, modified, as the narrative was transferred from the written to a visual medium. However, the religious motivational elements were significantly reduced, altering its focus by the screenwriters' creative modification to quotations and the conversation between the man and Ely. In this version of the story, the boy appears to display a higher level of differentiation, as he is not overwhelmed at the same degree or frequency. Additionally, as the actor, Kodi Smit-McPhee, improvised a scene defending the thief, he is loud and clear in his disapproval of his father's actions. In behind the scenes footage, it is revealed that McCarthy and his son John were on the film set and interacted with the cast and crew members. The author invited questions about the literary novel without becoming too involved in the filmmaking process, as he expressed an understanding of the complete difference in mediums.

In the director's commentary, John Hillcoat notes how McCarthy's novel focuses much on human relationships, as supposed to any big spectacle or event that lead to it; the man and the boy are at the story's centre. Furthermore, he notes how the story investigates 'that parental fear that we all have as parents and as human beings, just the fear of mortality... How do you leave your loved ones?'<sup>107</sup> The film adaptation focused on the power of parental instincts, a need for the man to prepare his son for the future, and equip him with the skills and mentality to navigate the dangerous world without him.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid

### Chapter Three Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*

Josh Malerman's debut novel depicts the story of a young mother who must raise and protect her children alone in a post-apocalyptic world where supernatural creatures pose a threat to their lives. The plot is split into two narratives; the first takes place in the current time when Malorie brings her two four-year-olds on a dangerous boat voyage to a sanctuary. The second narrative follows her past pregnancy, and shows the gradual breakdown of society, witnessed from within the walls of a stranger's house with fellow survivors. Chapter one investigated the parental strategies in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in which the most pressing threat to their safety was starvation, the freezing winter, or being hunted down by cannibals (referred to as 'blood cults').<sup>108</sup> In *Bird Box*, however, the threat is alarmingly more sinister, not merely because of its mysterious, indescribable origin. It instead boils down to the creatures' infliction on its victims through their *sight*, a transition of immediate insanity to suicide – the few who do survive the attack become loyal servants of the creatures, dedicating all their efforts to force other survivors to see. First, I will examine how Malorie re-establishes a sense of safety, which greatly contrasts the father's strategies in *The Road*, to illustrate the overall difference in their approach to parenthood. Furthermore, I will discuss Malorie's three parental strategies, the training regime, emotional cut-off, and the children being nameless, to show how she has a mother cold façade, to enforce emotionally-distant approach to motherhood to limit emotional expression or impulsive behaviour that may put her children in danger

The previous chapter examined the man's parental strategies developed to ensure his son's wellbeing and fundamentally encourage him to 'carry the fire', to go on towards an uncertain future. The family presented in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*, however, has a tremendously different family dynamic overall. Indeed, the parental strategies to be examined are harsher in nature, as the mother figure has to quickly adapt to the unforgiving environment by '[scaring the children] so completely that under no circumstances will they disobey her.'<sup>109</sup> Naturally, this will modify the parental strategies as well.

Before entering the literary analysis, it is useful to underline the limits of the children's cognitive and functional abilities due to their young age, as this will influence the parental strategies. The Boy and the Girl are four-years-old, a period in which they begin to

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<sup>108</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007)

<sup>109</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 93-94

explore and develop skillsets. In this age, the child expresses a fascination for storytelling, the ability to separate fantasy from reality, understand the constructs of time and may obey parent's rules, but does not yet distinguish right from wrong. It is also an age during which it is natural to ask frequent questions, display aggressive tantrums, and overall test limitations by disobeying their parents.<sup>110</sup> During this period of early development and unpredictability, it is impossible to engage in more in-depth conversation and reasoning, as seen between the father and his son in *The Road*.

A clear distinction between the parental strategies in McCarthy's *The Road* in comparison to Malerman's *Bird Box* is the core element of motivation displayed through parental strategies. Both post-apocalyptic novels depict a broken family unit with a single parental figure, whose primary goal is to ensure the survival of their child[ren]. However, the father figure in *The Road* must respond to the son's feelings of hopelessness and longing for his deceased mother. This experience is a significant emotional burden for the boy, who even explicitly expresses that he wishes he were dead.<sup>111</sup> Essentially, the father must help the boy to develop a stronger mentality to face the uncertain future. In *Bird Box*, on the contrary, Malorie does not have to fend off feelings of nihilism in the children, as they do not appear to be experiencing them, nor have they suffered a loss of a parent. In some ways, the children's young age shields them. The parents do have some clear common ground, as they must protect the children from the world and from themselves, which all boils down to suicidal thoughts versus unpredictable, childish whims. In conclusion, the parental strategies in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* were fundamentally designed to protect and strengthen the boy's mental health and fighting spirit. The parental strategies to be examined in this chapter, however, are significantly different as they are designed to protect through establishing an emotional cut-off. Similarly, to the father in McCarthy's novel, Malorie commits a significant effort to develop a sense of safety.

### **Establishing a sense of safety**

In contrast, Malorie is primarily focused on ensuring their physical safety rather than emotional wellbeing. While the father and son in *The Road* respond to this strategy with emotional intimacy through frequent conversations signposted by using 'okay,' Malorie establishes an emotional distance. This distance is present in the overall atmosphere in the

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<sup>110</sup> "Child Development: Ages and Stages." CHOC Children's. <https://www.choc.org/primary-care/ages-stages/#4-5-years>.

<sup>111</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.) p 56 & 298

family unit, particularly through the limitations of interaction as the children are not allowed to ask questions, be given explanations, and are frequently instructed to stay quiet. In contrast to the father and son, Malorie does not take moments to reflect on dangerous incidents or to check up on the children's emotional wellbeing. This is a very clear distinction between the two parental figures. It is as if Malorie is not only aware but afraid of becoming so overwhelmed by emotion to the extent that it paralyses her. Arguably, this is the core reasoning behind her emotional distance; allowing raw emotions creates an uncertainty, along with a platform that facilitates rash judgement that may have fatal consequences. Essentially, Malorie limits that unpredictability through stifling the overall emotional expression within the family unit. As a result, establishing a sense of safety is also modified.

One part of the parental strategy is focused on physical measures that establish a sense of safety. In the first few pages of the novel, Malorie describes the security measures designed to protect the children, such as assuring protection while sleeping. It reads; 'The children sleep under chicken wire draped in the black cloth down the hall... For the past four years, it has served as armour, protecting the children not from what could see them, but from what *they* could see.'<sup>112</sup> Malorie has spent a significant effort to design security measures, from the draped windows to the audio alarm system in the garden, which is bugged with mics to alert Malorie if something is outside. The most prominent threat towards their safety is seeing a creature, and therefore naturally drove Malorie to take a stance on an ethical dilemma; should the children keep their sight?

After all, establishing a sense of safety fundamentally means protecting their vision. While pregnant with the Boy, Malorie enters a discussion with a fellow housemate Don, who bluntly suggests 'you oughta [sic] blind those babies... The second they come out.'<sup>113</sup> The fellow mother-to-be Olympia, who is pregnant with the Girl, protests to the suggestion, labelling it insane, even cruel. For Malorie, however, it presents a better chance for survival, as 'every moment of her pending motherhood would be centered on protecting the eyes of her child. How much more could be done if this worry were taken away?'<sup>114</sup> By removing the children's vision, Malorie would significantly reduce the gripping threat the creatures hold on their lives. Additionally, it would allow her to approach motherhood in a gentler manner by raising the children with compassion and patient guidance. However, this approach will also

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<sup>112</sup> Josh Malerman. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 1 & 6

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p 161

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p 162

permanently rob the children of the ability of sight, which Malorie identifies as a price too high. As she is about to pour paint thinner into the Girl's open eyes, she accidentally spills the searing substance over her hand. Malorie notes how 'feeling it on her skin made it real. She couldn't do it.'<sup>115</sup> This very scene exemplifies the moral dilemma of survival, does the end justify the means? If she were to blind her children, would it be an action fuelled by motherly protection, or egoism, by seeking an easy way out? While there are no clear answers to these questions, Malorie made hers. Malorie's decision to not blind her children is made to grant them a future that they can see for themselves, but it is up to her as a mother to ensure said future.

This choice entails that Malorie, in some ways, accepts the role she must take on to protect her children, and she must immediately commit by enforcing rules. Initially, Malorie must teach the children to wake with their eyes closed. It reads, 'as each [child] woke and opened their eyes, [Malorie] would smack them hard on the arm. They would cry. Malorie would reach down and close their eyes with her fingers.'<sup>116</sup> This first step of the training regime relies heavily on the children's reflexes as mammals, as the external stimuli (the smack) will trigger a level of stress (also referred to as anxiety).<sup>117</sup> As most levels of stress are uncomfortable, naturally, the child will attempt to understand the pattern, what initiates the stress, and what makes it go away. This point is further highlighted by Malorie's tactics, as after closing the child's eyes, she would monitor them. If the children kept their eyes closed, Malorie would breastfeed them as a 'reward.'<sup>118</sup> Here, Malorie creates links from the act of opening their eyes to a smack to the desired closed eyes that is rewarded with food. These specific tactics, the smack versus reward, will guide the children through their natural reflexes and becomes the foundation of Malorie's maternal instinct in this new world.

### **The training regime**

In preparation for the journey ahead, Malorie develops a training regime to turn the children into 'listening machines.'<sup>119</sup> Initially, she would bring the newly born into the forest where she would identify sounds, explaining them in detail.<sup>120</sup> Although the children are unable to engage with the situation, they learn the importance of listening from a young age.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p 165

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p 94

<sup>117</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert. *The Eight concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking About The Individual and The group*. (Virginia: Leading Systems Press, 2006) p 2

<sup>118</sup> Josh Malerman. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 94

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p 192

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p 24

As the children grew older, Malorie would instruct the children to memorize 10-20 sounds, and challenge them to distinguish between facial expressions by listening to Malorie's breathing.<sup>121</sup> When the children failed the tasks or showed hesitance to perform, Malorie would scream at them or deny them food. These reactions are linked to the reward system developed while the children were toddlers. During this training regime, Malorie notices how the Boy's skills exceed expectations, and, as a result, the Girl assumes an outsider position in their family unit.

As their survival depends on their ability to listen, the Boy's heightened listening skills affect the family dynamic. The negative effects of this were present in their training, such as when Malorie trained them to get water from the well. This way, they could practice feeling for the path with their toes while also staying aware of the sounds around them. While the Boy completes the task without much difficulty, the Girl struggles and is overwhelmed by fear.<sup>122</sup> This scene displays how different each experience is for the individual child; the Boy's listening skills guides him through the unknown territory, and Malorie's positive response to his progress is a clear motivating factor. However, the Girl does not have this skillset to depend on, and the inability to complete tasks directly results in Malorie's punishments. In this particular case, 'Malorie denied the Girl food until she agreed to do it.'<sup>123</sup> Although Malorie's character motivation is to ensure their survival, the training regime produced some negative effects on the family unit and seemed to form what Murray Bowen would describe as a "triangulation."

The concept of triangles holds significant importance in Bowenian theory, as it considers three-person relationship systems to be the building blocks of a larger emotional system.<sup>124</sup> In the previous chapter on McCarthy's *The Road*, a triangle formed between the man, Ely, and Boy/God in an effort to come to terms with the demise of their faith. Here, however, it is formed within the family unit, where Malorie and the Boy are the comfortable insiders and the Girl, the uncomfortable outsider. Triangles are natural in human interactions, and mostly operates on a subconscious level. As a mother, Malorie's character motivation is guided by her desire to ensure their survival, and not to consciously exclude the Girl. The latter is instead an unfortunate response to a triangulation. The Boy's developed senses guided

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p 146

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. p 96

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p 95

<sup>124</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert. *The Eight concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking About The Individual and The group.* (Virginia: Leading Systems Press, 2006) p 47-49

him through the tasks that the Girl struggled with, and when she hesitated, she was met with a series of consequences. Even if Malorie's actions were "justified" in an unforgiving, dangerous new world, it does not obliterate the Girl's experience of exclusion. It only means that she must overcome them alone. By being the outsider of the family unit, the Girl becomes a 'symptom-bearer' by showing signs of evasion, self-punishment, and fear towards Malorie. The Girl's struggles are most prominent in the film adaptation of the narrative (which will be expanded upon in the second part of this chapter), but if one looks closely at the literary text, one can identify some rare moments giving insight to her experience.

The Girl's exclusion is prominent during their journey, even visually presented through how the family unit is seated in the boat. Malorie instructs the Boy to sit in front and the Girl in the back, while Malorie rows.<sup>125</sup> This line-up suggests that throughout the journey, Malorie will physically facing the Boy, who will operate as the main navigator due to his enhanced listening skills. As a result, the Girl will be facing Malorie's back, which naturally emphasizes her possible experience of exclusion – in addition to the difficulty of engaging in conversations or hear the other in her family unit. It is indeed confirmed that Malorie has her back turned to the Girl.<sup>126</sup> This exclusion is further highlighted after when Malorie is injured and receives help from the Boy to row the boat – as his position is more convenient to assist.<sup>127</sup> This scene in-and-of-itself appears harmless, even encouraging as the family unit is working together. However, it is excluded member's next actions that raise questions.

The Girl refuses to eat, which arguably is an undesired consequence of Malorie's parenting approach. As they are on a life-threatening journey, the family's survival mostly depends on the children's ability to listen and follow instructions. So far, the Girl has been the member of the unit that has contributed least. During their training regime, the children grew accustomed to a set of punishments that would range from verbal 'abuse' to being refused food. Here, it seems that the Girl is punishing herself, as she has become too familiar with the "cause and effect" construction of her upbringing. In some ways, it stands as a pre-emptive act – Malorie cannot punish her if she is already punishing herself. Dr. Laura Markham, who earned her Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Columbia University, argues that while harsh limits may temporarily control a child's behaviour, it does not teach the child to self-regulate. In her article 'What's Wrong with Strict Parenting,' she explains how 'harsh limits trigger a

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<sup>125</sup> Maleman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 11

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p 203

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p 190

resistance to taking responsibility for themselves.<sup>128</sup> This argument gives insight into the reasoning behind the Girl's decision. However, when Malorie threatens to leave the Girl behind if she refuses to eat, the Girl gives in. This unfortunate episode ends on an optimistic note, as Malorie 'finds the strength to encourage her' and gives the Girl a positive reinforcement by telling her 'well done.'<sup>129</sup>

Traditionally, Malorie's harsh approach to motherhood, and particularly her training regime, would immediately be labelled as emotional and verbal abuse; however, it is designed to accommodate for the threat and the age of her children. As the only caretaker responsible for two children, she must accommodate for the dangerous environment by preparing for it. An important factor to this ethical dilemma, and perhaps a minor redeeming quality, is Malorie's awareness of this subject. During their journey, Malorie directly touches upon the subject matter. To illustrate, it reads: 'Yes, she has trained them well. But it's not a nice thing to think about. *Training* the children means she has scared them so completely that under no circumstances will they disobey her.'<sup>130</sup> This extract here illustrates Malorie's difficulty of coming to terms with her role, as she inflicts fear to not only sharpen but modify the children's natural responses.

One can examine Malorie's parental strategies in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.<sup>131</sup> Throughout the novel, the most fundamental need for safety and security is threatened. In comparison, the father and son in *The Road* severely struggle to meet their physiological needs, such as food and water. This is a direct consequence of the death of all animals and crops, and therefore frequently suffered from starvation. In *Bird Box*, however, this is not an issue. Indeed, it is rather the severe lack of safety needs, that places immense psychological pressure on the parental figure, as Malorie must adapt her parenting approach to protecting the children from the unforgiving sociological environment.

The family units of both novels essentially struggle to meet what is categorized as basic needs in accordance with Maslow's Hierarchy. The father figure in *The Road* spends significant effort toward fulfilling the boy's psychological needs, specifically the need for belonging and love. This is due to the boy's fear of the future and struggles with suicidal

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<sup>128</sup> Markham, Laura. "What's Wrong with Strict Parenting?" Aha! Parenting. <https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/positive-discipline/strict-parenting>.

<sup>129</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 205

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p 93-4

<sup>131</sup> Mcleod, Saul. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Simply Psychology. Simply Psychology, May 21, 2018. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.



thoughts.<sup>132</sup> A similar thematic scene surfaces in *Bird Box* once, when Tom shares how he found his eight-year-old daughter dead in the bathtub and how he is unsure of whether she witnessed a creature, or if it was suicide.<sup>133</sup> This very scene illustrates not only the significant emotional and traumatic impact of loss, but it is also a one-two punch of complete uncertainty, as one questions whether their death was inflicted upon them by another, or executed by themselves. Perhaps this influences Malorie's decision to travel while the children are very young, as they are yet to develop a complex emotional spectrum and rational thought, and therefore rely heavily on the protection and guidance of their parental figure.

### **Emotional cut-off: The nameless children**

The last parental strategy is the symbolic and functional implications of the nameless children. In McCarthy's *The Road*, all characters are nameless, which directly engages with the man's philosophical pondering of how everything has lost its meaning. McCarthy's decision to make the characters nameless is an artistic choice, and it is made in an effort to convey the story in a particular way. In contrast, in Malerman's *Bird Box*, it is a conscious decision made by the main character of the novel. Although in technical terms, both cases of the nameless characters are made by the authors (in other words, it is an artistic choice), Malerman linked the decision making to Malorie.

As a result, it builds on her character motivation that raises questions towards her hesitation to name the children. In the second-to-last page of the novel, Malorie names her children Olympia and Tom, named after the two survivors, with whom she had the most intimate relationships. When reaching the sanctuary, they are asked to give their names, and it reads, 'It's as if this is the first time the question [concerning the children's names] has ever mattered to Malorie. Suddenly there is room in her life for such luxuries as names.'<sup>134</sup> This is the only time Malorie addresses the subject, and the timing alongside the keyword "luxuries" gives a vital insight into her thought process as a survivor and a mother. Up until the last few pages of the novel, Malorie enforces a rationalizing thought-process to ensure survival. Malorie is aware of how emotional distress clouds her judgement, and through her harsh

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<sup>132</sup> "Child Development: Ages and Stages." CHOC Children's. <https://www.choc.org/primary-care/ages-stages/#4-5-years>.

<sup>132</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. A Borzoi Book. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007). p 56 & 298

<sup>133</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 69-71

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p 377

façade and decision to keep the children nameless, she establishes what is referred to in Bowenian theory as an emotional cut-off.

A cut-off is established to protect oneself from relationship fusions that are emotionally intense or even draining. Initially, Bowen noticed this phenomenon in the 1960s when a significant number of teenagers ran away from home or rebelled, and it is described as a ‘process of separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away, or denying the importance of the parental family.’<sup>135</sup> It can be mutual, where both parties participate, or it can be unilateral, meaning it is only desired by one person.<sup>136</sup> In this case, it is a unilateral decision made by Malorie. The emotional cut-off displayed during the training regime and established symbolically by Malorie’s decision as a mother to keep the children nameless. It is even arguable that the children’s lack of names dehumanizes them. Nonetheless, I would argue that the emotional cut-off is made not in an effort for Malorie to distance herself from her children or the importance of family; but rather to relieve the tension of her family unit in order to access her critical thinking to ensure the safety of her family unit.

Another interesting element to the nameless children lies in the practicality of their deaths. In many ways, the mere act of naming the children raises the stakes as a name provides each child with a new facet of their identity. If the children die nameless, they would fall into a category of unidentified deaths and essentially be referenced to as ‘Janie Doe’ and ‘Johnny Doe.’ While it may not hold the relevance in this post-apocalyptic world, Malorie comes from a society in which it did. In conclusion, keeping the children nameless serves two prominent purposes; it establishes an emotional distance for Malorie to make balanced decisions, while also limiting the emotional impact of the children’s potential deaths. Nonetheless, it

On closer examination, a paradox surfaces through the conflicting semantic and syntactic constructions used to refer to the children. To illustrate, in the opening chapter, it is written: ‘The Boy and the Girl step forward, and Malorie kneels before them [to check their blindfolds].’<sup>137</sup> The children are not named but rather referenced by their individual gender. To make the sentence correct, one can either write ‘the boy,’ or ‘Boy’ by treating it as a proper noun, as if Malorie considers it a (temporary) name. However, while the nouns are

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<sup>135</sup> Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Eight concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking About The Individual and The group*. (Virginia: Leading Systems Press, 2006) P. 57

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p 58

<sup>137</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 10

specified by the article ‘the,’ they are also capitalized. Not only does this break the traditional syntax rules, it is also a semantic contradiction in-and-of-itself, as Malorie treats a noun (boy) as a proper noun (Boy), making the article ‘the’ redundant.<sup>138</sup> Arguably, this is a literary technique utilized to illustrate Malorie’s inner conflict about the nameless children; by visually displaying her insecurity and, in some ways, her self-deceit.

The key factor is that this information is only accessible to Malorie and the reader; since even if Malorie were to express ‘the Boy,’ the semantic information (the capitalization) is only accessible through reading. Although it appears as if Malorie only addresses the nameless children on the second-to-last page of the novel, she does engage with the subject indirectly throughout the narrative by challenging syntactic and semantic rules. The subject matter may not be expressed through inner dialogue or character conversations, but it is expressed between the lines of the novel. Additionally, it raises the question of the purpose of identity and names in post-apocalyptic scenarios, which directly correlates with the thematic elements in McCarthy’s *The Road*. In some ways, it becomes a hidden opportunity, known only to herself and the reader of the novel, to treat her children as individuals, in times when the circumstances would not allow it. It is as if her subconscious is rebelling against her conscious, identifying the true value of her children in secret.

Her decision to not name her children is a prime example of illustrating the complexity of raising children during catastrophes as one has to make sacrifices and decisions without becoming overwhelmed by the anxiety of death. It is a parental strategy as much as it is a coping mechanism for Malorie, whose whole existence revolves around protecting her children. In conclusion, while this parental strategy is controversial, it does give Malorie some emotional distance to increase her rational thinking.

As a mother, Malorie is a paradox. Externally, she assumes the role of a harsh, unforgiving mother with her list restrictions and punishments, and however, internally there is a woman who is deeply aware and terrified of the potential consequences of her approach to motherhood. Her insecurities are frequently illustrated through invasive italicized thoughts, such as ‘you’re a bad mother,’ ‘you are saving their lives for a life not worth living’, and ‘this is not childhood.’<sup>139</sup> These very lines surface as Malorie and the children leaves their house to begin the voyage and gives insight into her state of mind, which she even describes as an

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<sup>138</sup> “Nouns.” Grammarly, May 7, 2019. <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/nouns/>.

<sup>139</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 5, 6 & 15

experience of ‘mania’ and ‘hysteria.’<sup>140</sup> It is clear that she is potentially on the brink of a breakdown, and Malorie knows that she cannot afford that to happen. In conclusion, Malorie’s parental strategies (sense of safety, training regime, and nameless children) are developed to establish emotional cut-off. Similarly, to how Malorie considers names a luxury, it is almost as if emotions fall into the same category as she cannot afford to be paralyzed by them as she must stay alert to ensure their survival.

In the final few pages of the novel, there is a clear transitional phase, as the family unit has safely reached the sanctuary, where Malorie allows herself to let her guard down and reflect on the journey she has undertaken. First, it is illustrated when she catches her reflection in the mirror, as it reads; ‘She hardly resembles the woman she once was... Her scalp, raw and red, is visible in patches... The bones in her face have shifted... She opens her mouth slightly to reveal a chipped tooth,’ however, beneath the broken exterior, she identifies ‘a fire that has propelled her for four and a half years... that commanded her to make a better life for her children.’<sup>141</sup> Throughout the narrative, Malorie has had a prominent internal conflict as she has struggled to accept her approach to motherhood in this Post-Apocalyptic world, as she made the decision to sacrifice emotional intimacy to ensure their survival. Now, under the safe constructs of a larger community, she knows that she can begin to make up for the lost time and connect with her children, initiated when she finally names her children Tom and Olympia.<sup>142</sup> This is further emphasized on the last page of the novel, as Malerman writes; ‘Now, here, hugging the children, it feels to Malorie like the house and the river are just two mythical locations, lost somewhere in all that infinity.’<sup>143</sup> Now, Malorie can make up for lost time, with an opportunity to abandon the previous parental strategies, and introduce new ones, with a focus on establishing emotional intimacy.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p 7

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p 376

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. p 377

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. p 378

Chapter FiveSusanne Bier's *Bird Box*

In the previous chapter, I examined three parental strategies Malorie utilized and what effects they had on the family unit. This chapter investigates the parental strategies developed in the film's adaptation to compare its narrative structure and parental approach. As a result, this thesis will cross-examine the full representation of the core family unit. In terms of plot progression, the story has a similar beginning and end; however, the family unit has been modified along with key plot points. Specifically, the three prominent strategies in the novel (sense of safety, training regime, and nameless children) have been significantly modified, as the character Tom develops a romantic relationship with Malorie and becomes a stepfather-figure for the two children. His presence affects the family system, as he frequently challenges Malorie's methods, emphasizing the importance of emotional intimacy and the promise of a future. This character introduces a fourth parental strategy, storytelling, which greatly contrasts the previous parental strategies. As a result, this chapter will investigate how the story has been transferred from page-to-screen, specifically, how it alters the core family unit and the parental strategies.

The film adaptation for *Bird Box* was released in December 2018, featuring A-list actress Sandra Bullock as Malorie, and quickly became one of Netflix's biggest hits.<sup>144</sup> Universal bought the rights to *Bird Box* in 2013, prior to its publication in 2014. Originally, it was to be directed by Andy Muschietti, who is known for his work with famous horror films like *Mama* (2013) and *It* (2017), but the project lost its momentum, and the script ended up on Hollywood's 2014's Black List of the best unproduced screenplays. The project was picked up in 2017 when one of the original producers joined Netflix, and the film was soon in production. While the movie received a cold reception from some critics, branding it an ill-timed rip-off following the massive success of *A Quiet Place*, it was widely popular among the viewers and quickly became an internet phenomenon.<sup>145</sup> This directly resulted in internet memes and "blindfold challenges", in which people would do dangerous dares such as

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<sup>144</sup> Bier, Susanne, dir. *Bird Box*. Netflix, 2018.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80196789?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C07507958d67e6c4a7145b06ead068d31f2ed8a5f%3A22fe2d3368d60a57f9596eb462498a1a6f441c82%2C%2C>

**Note: As Chicago referencing do not require time stamps, I will only refer to the film source once.**

<sup>145</sup> Lee, Benjamin. "Flying High: How Bird Box Became Netflix's Biggest Hit to Date." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, January 7, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/07/bird-box-sandra-bullock-netflix-memes-hit>.

crossing a busy road blindfolded. This prompted Netflix to issue a statement, warning its viewers from participating in the challenges.<sup>146</sup>

Some Hollywood movie critics, such as Scott Mendelson, trace the film's success back to Sandra Bullock, claiming the film 'proves [she] is still a huge movie star,' however, a significant part of it lies in its direction by Susanne Bier.<sup>147</sup> Previously, she has directed huge successes such as *Love is All you Need* (2012), *After the Wedding* (2006) and *In a Better World* (2010), the latter was even awarded an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year. In her biography on IMDB, it is written that '[though] Bier's films often play out against a wide-reaching global backdrop, their focus is intimate, carefully exploring the emotions and complexities of familial bonds.'<sup>148</sup> Her previous experience and passion for depicting complicated family units naturally affected the direction of *Bird Box*, as key elements were tweaked to highlight the core thematic elements of family further.

In contrast to the film adaptation of McCarthy's *The Road*, a movie that closely followed the original plotline, there were many significant creative changes to characters, plot, and theme behind *Bird Box*. Geoffrey Wagner suggests diving adaptations into three, the second being commentary 'where the original is purposely or unwittingly altered due to the intentions of the film-maker.'<sup>149</sup> Bier's adaptation of *Bird Box* falls under this category, and, as a result, the creative modifications greatly affects the parental strategies. This chapter will compare key changes and how they affect the family unit.

Before entering the analysis of the parental strategies, it is useful first to establish how the members of the family unit have been altered, beginning with Malorie. While the novel depicts Malorie as a young woman struggling to accept motherhood, the build-up to this character's conflict is left somewhat unexplored. It is as if the narrative structure, created by Malerman, relies too much on the anxiety naturally inflicted in post-apocalyptic scenarios, rather than thoroughly exploring Malorie's individual character and human experience. In short, Malorie's conflict is triggered by the circumstantial framework (the loss of her sister,

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<sup>146</sup> Shoard, Catherine. "Netflix Warns Viewers against Bird Box Challenge Meme: 'Do Not End up in Hospital'." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, January 3, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/03/netflix-bird-box-challenge-meme-sandra-bullock-blindfold>.

<sup>147</sup> Mendelson, Scott. "Netflix's 'Bird Box' Proves Sandra Bullock Is Still A Huge Movie Star." Forbes. Forbes Magazine, December 31, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2018/12/29/bird-box-netflix-sandra-bullock-trevante-rhodes/#1170bdf7e28>.

<sup>148</sup> "Susanne Bier." IMDb. IMDb.com. Accessed May 9, 2020. [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0081540/?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_dr](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0081540/?ref_=tt_ov_dr).

<sup>149</sup> Cartmell, Deborah, and Imelda Whelehan. *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p 5

the breakdown of society, and the threat of supernatural creatures), whereas the film adaptation adds a layer of underlying emotional trauma from previous relationships.

The screenplay writer Eric Heisserer bridges the gap between her behavioural pattern to more complex reasoning, traced back all the way to her childhood. The underlying emotional trauma is fundamentally traced back to Malorie's failed relationship with her parents and the father of her child, which resulted in her "default" emotional distancing. This is clear creative commissions from its literary "source" depicted as Malorie being close with her parents, which is illustrated in an emotionally-intimate phone call.<sup>150</sup> In addition, the father of her child transitions from being a one-night-stand to a romantically linked roommate. These creative altercations are revealed in the first scene of the linear plot,<sup>151</sup> where we witness Malorie in her third trimester, hidden away in a studio apartment, having a conversation with her sister. It is in this very conversation, Malorie says, 'loneliness is just coincidental, it is really about people's inability to connect'; a line openly signposting her struggle to create lasting relationships.

These creative changes in Malorie's past will naturally affect the parental strategies, but nothing has had a greater impact on the family than the additional family member, Tom. In the novel, Malorie is immediately drawn to him when they first meet at the house and repeatedly looks to his memory for guidance during hardship. In her eyes, he is a natural leader and a source of comfort and friendship. Whereas in the film adaptation, Tom becomes romantically involved with Malorie and takes on the role of a stepfather as they raise the children together. Tom is somewhat of a "sparring partner" to Malorie, as he challenges her approach to parenthood and directly criticizes her refusal to name the children. This addition to the family unit alters its overall dynamic and results in arguably a deeper, more interesting, and complex exploration of the family in post-apocalyptic narratives.

As these key changes in plot points and characters are established, I will address how the parental strategies have been modified, beginning with establishing a sense of safety. This strategy is significantly altered, such as the reduction of safety precautions. Worried something were to happen while sleeping, Malorie installed chicken wire to arch over the babies' cribs, as depicted in the novel. In a brief panning shot following Malorie, we see an overview of the living room (which, judging from the beds, function as a common bedroom)

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<sup>150</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 31

<sup>151</sup> **Note:** The film opens in medias res as Malorie gives her children instructions prior their voyage, then transitions to earlier in the plotline.

and how it is organized. This initial glimpse into their home and the matter it is presented (brief, blurry background) reflects Malorie's mindset.

In this scene, the camera follows Malorie's swift stride through the house, and I would argue that this brief pan shot visually symbolizes the mindset of the protagonist. The short four-second shot shows a hammock, hand-painted ornamental light bulbs, and a tent, with a large naturalistic painting of a forest in the background. In comparison to the house depicted in the novel, with key differences in safety installation not to mention the emphasis on old bloodstains all over the house,<sup>152</sup> one can see that this house accommodates for the children in a more intimate way, through an exploration of art and safe places. It is a clear parallel to the first-linear-scene of Malorie in her studio apartment (which was also filled with art), only this time she is not alone. However, while the home created is relatively safe and comfortable, Malorie is still unable to fully partake in the family unit emotionally, as visually presented through the pan shot. This is further emphasized Malorie's disengagement with the scene and how she later interrupts storytelling between Tom and the children and communicates how Malorie is yet to learn how to connect.

A clear change to the plot is the removal of the discussion concerning blinding the children, and the scene in which Malorie nearly did. Arguably, this is a direct result of Tom's involvement in the family unit. The primary motivation for blinding the children was rooted in fear of what might happen to them if Malorie died and how she was to spend 'every moment of her pending motherhood would be centred on protecting the eyes of her child.'<sup>153</sup> The fact that she was the sole parent and protector for the children was a tremendous burden in and of itself. The presence of Tom immediately relieves some of that tension. Additionally, considering how passionate he is to ensure the children have a good childhood, it is difficult to see that ethical discussion with Tom, who would most likely not allow it. As a result, the thematic spectrum shifts from the novel's focus on sacrificial survival and flawed parenthood to the film's own additional focus on overcoming emotional trauma and family resilience.

The birds also hold more significance in the film's depiction, and Malorie's interaction with them builds on her character. In the novel, Tom discovers the birds while on a supply run, noticing how they may function as an alarm system.<sup>154</sup> The film adaptation, however, it is Malorie who finds the birds, and they become a sort of emotional outlet, as she allows herself

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<sup>152</sup> Maleman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 2

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p 162

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p 170



to tap into the maternal role by protecting them. An example is the opening of the movie after Malorie has given instructions to the children; she must take the birds from the cage to a little box with punched holes. What is most important to this scene is Malorie's tone of voice, as she comforts the birds by repeating 'it's okay' in a gentle, comforting manner, until she redirects her attention to the children to say 'let's go,' in a more instructive, harsh voice. This change of tone, operating as quick as turning a light switch, is important, as it reveals how it a conscious decision operating as a parental strategy. Malorie appears to subscribe to the belief that fear and punishments will scare the children into obedience, which is, in her estimation, the approach that can raise the chances of their survival. However, that does not mean that she may secretly mourn the loss of her early motherhood, and the birds allow her to tap into a more gentle, protective side that circumstances otherwise do not. These birds, however, do not solely operate as an extension of a parental strategy or a platform for an emotional outlet; they also have a tremendous symbolic implication to the story.

In literary and cultural discourses tracing back to ancient Egypt, birds are, according to Juan E. Cirlot, commonly utilized to symbolize human souls, and arguably the three birds in the box function as a symbol for Malorie and the two children.<sup>155</sup> The concept of the soul has many different interpretations, values, and functions depending on its cultural or religious framework. At the same time, while it may be interpreted as a source of energy, a spiritual force or similar, a recurrent explanation is that the soul encapsulates the essence of each individual. Returning to *Bird Box*, if the birds in the box symbolize the three family members, it may be interpreted that their souls, their mere existence, is held captive.

There is a prominent transition from captivity to freedom, a concept that is relevant for both the family unit and birds. The greatest threat to the family unit is to view a creature. They defend themselves by wearing blindfolds, living in a house with boarded-up windows, or hide under blankets (such as when the children are just born or during the voyage on the river), and there is a clear visual and conceptual parallel to the birds trapped in the box. The family's existence, along with their 'souls,' is not only limited but one of captivity, as they live in a world controlled by mystical beings more powerful than themselves. As the story comes to an end, and the family reaches the sanctuary, there is a clear transition that takes place. Upon discovering the sanctuary's garden population of birds, Malorie and her two children decide to set their birds free to 'be with their friends.' Subsequently, Malorie names

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<sup>155</sup> Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2001. p. 28  
[https://www.academia.edu/7141304/A\\_Dictionary\\_of\\_Symbols\\_J.E.\\_Cirlot\\_](https://www.academia.edu/7141304/A_Dictionary_of_Symbols_J.E._Cirlot_)

her children, and vocally takes on the role of their mother, and this point will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter. In the end, the birds, the mother, and the children are no longer in physical or emotional captivity, but rather in a safe environment surrounded by fellow survivors and birds. The symbolic implications that the birds represent the souls of the family unit reaches a full circle as they are all set free. (set the children free)

As a parental strategy, establishing a sense of safety was not solely influenced by Tom's presence; it was directly affected due to a key change in the plotline. In the novel, Malorie and the children are the only survivors after an attack murders the other survivors of the house. It is also that same night Malorie receives a call from Rick, inviting them to a sanctuary. Whereas in the movie, the family unit has established a home, with a garden for food supplies, and receive the invitation to the sanctuary when the children are four years of age. This is an important plotline edit to point out, as it modifies the character motivation of the parental figures. Originally, Malorie tailored her motherhood to prepare the upcoming journey, through establishing strict routines and a training regime. This might also explain why Malorie never tailored the house to accommodate for the playful and imaginary needs for the children, as they would have to leave without notice. Malorie's tries to limit any disturbance, any emotional burden, that may compromise their safety or journey, as she focuses on the sanctuary further down the road. However, as that over-arching motivation is not present in the film, it modifies the next parental strategy to be examined, the training regime.

In the film, the training regime is designed to equip the children with a critical life skill, rather than have them consciously transformed into 'listening machines.'<sup>156</sup> There is a distinct contrast between the novel's depiction of harsh training routines and punishment in comparison to the film where the children are guided by Malorie in a more gentle manner. To illustrate, Malorie and the two children are outside, and while blindfolded, she illustrates how sounds are different in an open space versus close quarters. The mother directly partakes in the training and guides the children, and do not express any threats of punishment. Additionally, the training regime is only displayed in one scene, whereas in the novel, Malorie frequently visits memories of them and thereby becomes an embedded element to the narrative. As a result, this does not only change the narrative structure and thematic elements, it also modifies how the family functions as an emotional unit. The interactions between

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<sup>156</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 192

Malorie and the children are no longer dominated by “abusive” yelling or threats, which presents the mother figure more emotionally complex. This complexity, I would argue, is symbolized in the decision to keep the children nameless.

In the previous chapter, I examined the symbolic and functional elements of the nameless children, which was an unchallenged decision made by Malorie. The film adaptation places a great emphasis on this element of the story, and even present a longer discussion directly criticizing it as a parental strategy. In a heated argument, Tom says the following: [The children] deserve dreams. They deserve love. They deserve hope. They deserve a mother. *They deserve a mother.* You haven’t given them names, Mal. Their names are Boy and Girl! Think about that!’ Here, Tom pinpoints a core issue to the family unit, which is the lack of emotional intimacy and essentially criticizing Malorie for not being a mother. As a result, the thematic elements of parenthood, childhood, and identity becomes a more prominent part of the narrative and Malorie’s character arch, rather than a thematic backdrop left undiscussed.

Another interesting element to this discussion is how the children refer to Malorie by name, in contrast to being called mommy in the novel.<sup>157</sup> After all, while Malorie greatly struggles with motherhood, she does originally brand herself as a mother by having her kids refer to her as one. By changing the character brand from ‘mommy’ to Malorie, it places a greater emphasis on the detachment to the family unit. Essentially, it sends a message that the character operates solely as a guardian, like Tom, rather than a maternal figure. It may be interpreted as an attempt to maintain her old identity by limiting the symbolic implications of being referred to as a mother. Naturally, this raises questions around the practicality of establishing that boundary; how may Malorie have reacted to being called mother, and if a child did, would there be a punishment? These questions are left unanswered; however, the uncertainty invites philosophical pondering, which may be more compelling than a clear answer may be. In the end, there is a clearer character arch that is fulfilled in the film’s final scene, in which Malorie names the children, then says, ‘and I am their mother.’

A vital part of the film’s adaptation is the inclusion of Malorie’s complicated relationships with her parents, which caused her to limit her emotional engagement with most new relationships. It is even directly stated, when Malorie says ‘loneliness is just coincidental, it’s really about people’s inability to connect,’ alluding to her “doomed motherhood” to come.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. p 8

These negative experiences engage a more complex network of family function and its transference of interactional patterns. In relation to Bowenian theory, it taps into the concept of the multigenerational transmission process, as the film adaption depicts the emotionally draining and complicated family unit in which Malorie grew up, hence why she thoroughly struggles with parenthood.

The concept of multigenerational transmission process is closely linked with the function of the differentiation scale. Those lower on the scale generally experience more relationship fusion and anxiety, which leads to poorer decisions and greater difficulties with relationships.<sup>158</sup> An individual on this end of the scale navigates their decision making through emotional thinking processes rather than rationale ones and have trouble distinguishing their role or influence in conflicts. Hence, a child within a family unit who is exposed to domestic abuse, for example, is more susceptible to adopting a similar parental strategy in the future. This may lead to a skewed idea of how a family unit should operate as their perception has been shaped in a particular manner, such as believing violence is an appropriate, even expected, form of punishment. Of course, this does not by any means entail that individuals have no personal agency, and there are many exceptions to this theory, however, this Bowenian idea sheds light on the processes behind individuals who may follow their parents' footsteps. Utilizing this theory as a lens, one can attempt to decipher how Malorie's complicated relationship with her parents has affected her and how the problem traces back to her father's influence.

In contrast to the novel's depiction, Malorie has cut off all contact with her parents, and the occasional line offers an explanation as to why and give insight to her complicated childhood. Her mother is generally left out of the narrative and is only mentioned by her sister Jessica expressing a wish for having 'a mother would have actually raised [them],' which illustrates how the sisters thoroughly lacked a maternal figure growing up. Their father, on the other hand, is discussed on only three different occasions, however, it indicates his lasting, negative effect on Malorie. In a scene between her and Tom, we learn that Malorie was taught special tricks with weapons, describing her father as a 'real cowboy,' and adds in a flat, evasive voice that she had 'an interesting childhood.'

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<sup>158</sup> Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: a New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group*. Lake Frederick, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2013. Page 76-77

While the early depiction of the father is somewhat ambiguous, it is when Malorie draws a comparison to one of her housemates that we are given a vital insight into his true character. Douglas (John Malkovich) is depicted as an arrogant, selfish, and aggressive man, who places himself and his needs above everyone else. To illustrate, he utilizes name-calling to bully her housemates (calling Olympia a ‘simpleton,’ or other survivors ‘doofuses’), refers to himself as a ‘towering intellect’ and, lastly, upon discovering a shop filled with supplies, bluntly suggests to leave the rest of the group to starve, directly stating it is ‘better them than us.’ When Malorie points out that Douglas reminds her of his father, suggesting they would be ‘two pricks in a pod,’ it gives invaluable insight into her upbringing and how her original family unit operated. In relation to Bowenian theory, which places a great focus on the transfer of anxiety within the system, it is clear that Malorie’s father had a significantly negative effect on the family unit as he, like Douglas, overloads the system through his frequent, abusive behaviour. This is arguably an important factor that shaped Malorie in a negative manner, and perhaps inflicted the fear of parenthood. Since she is still struggling to maintain relationships and have a complicated family history, it sheds light on her difficulty of becoming a mother as it entails building a lasting relationship with a child, who is dependent on her for protection and guidance. For Malorie, becoming a mother forces her to face and overcome her past struggles, and she must do so under impossible and life-threatening circumstances.

During Malorie and Douglas’ conversation, he argues that ‘in the end, there are only two types of people; the assholes and the dead’ and they later toast to him being wrong, to ‘hoping there is more.’ This interaction is important, as Malorie shows a desire to breaking the notion of “the assholes and the dead” and expresses hope for what is to come. In Douglas’ defence, his harsh depiction of surviving in post-apocalyptic times, narrowed down to it only being ‘the assholes and the dead,’ may not be as simple as him filling the role of a villain. It is rather a part of his internal struggle and a mindset that is a product of his flawed past, similarly to how Malorie struggles to overcome on her own. In the first act, Douglas loses his wife Lydia (Rebecca Pidgeon) when she tries to protect Malorie and mourns her loss, even seeks comfort in alcohol. During a longer conversation with Malorie, Douglas opens up about his two failed marriages. One divorce ended with the ex-wife claimed ‘calling [Douglas] a creep would be an affront to creeps everywhere’ and the second saying ‘she no longer fears going to hell, since ‘it couldn’t possibly be worse than being married to [Douglas].’ As Malorie is convinced of her inability to connect, in some ways, so does Douglas, who

somewhat accepts his brand as a ‘villain’ in people’s lives. Hence, his comments concerning the ‘assholes and the dead’ may allude to himself and his wife. When Malorie toasts for ‘hoping there is more,’ it may be interpreted as a secret message, telling Douglas that he has a choice and can therefore change. This is a lesson that is applicable to herself, too, as it is arguable that one of Malorie’s greatest fears is becoming like her father and must actively choose to distance herself from her previous family unit.

As a result of the story’s non-linear depiction, switching between one narrative following the journey on the river and the second following Malorie’s pregnancy during the collapse of society, Malorie is initially depicted as a harsh, emotionally distant character. She holds a similarity to a one-dimensional character, which lacks depth and not undergo a transition of learning or self-reflecting. On the surface, it may appear that she has fallen into her father’s footsteps, as she utilizes parental strategies one could classify as aggressive or even abusive. However, Malorie’s interactions with Douglas, however, displays how she separates herself from her childhood family unit and rejects the notion of extending her father’s values.

This point of crisis and its thematic implications surfaces in the film’s third act, as Malorie navigates through the forest blindly looking for the two children and is distracted by the monster parroting the voices of Jessica, Tom, and Douglas. The voices of Jessica and Tom naturally engage with Malorie’s experience of loss and, not to mention, longing for her loved ones. A similar scene is previously shown in the first act, where we learn that the monsters utilize voices of loved ones to lure in its victims to see, such as when Douglas’ wife Lydia (Rebecca Pidgeon) hears the voice of her mother, who had passed away ten years prior. The voices of Malorie’s sister and lover is contrasted by Douglas’ voice. While Malorie did not form a close relationship with Douglas, it has been established that he resembles her father and hence may function as a reminder of him. An important aspect of this lies in the phrasing, as Malorie states, ‘you *sound* like my father.’ This phrasing is ambiguous. One can interpret it as he expresses himself/operates in a similar manner, or one can it can be interpreted in a literal sense, that his voice (tone, intonation, choice of words) have an uncanny resemblance to her father. The second distinction may be important as Douglas’ voice arguably operates as a trigger, one that causes Malorie such distress that she trips and knocks herself unconscious, directly resulting in her and the children becoming separated. This scene holds great symbolic implications; Malorie’s conflict with motherhood is rooted in her emotionally draining experiences of her family unit growing up and has caused her to thoroughly question her

ability to connect with anyone, especially her children. Visual storytelling that displays the core element of the protagonist's crisis, as Malorie is temporarily separated from her children. She gathers her family unit by utilizing a new parental strategy, storytelling.

This strategy was not part of the story's original depiction; however, Tom's engagement with the children through storytelling directly challenges the established rules of the family unit. For Malorie, she appears to focus too greatly on the children's safety (establishing rules, training regimes, keeping the children nameless) that she refrains from connecting with them emotionally in any traditional manner (storytelling, playing, longer conversations). However, these limitations are a conscious decision; one made to avoid giving the children promises she cannot keep and to protect them. As Tom introduces storytelling, it creates a platform for debate where one can identify each parental figure's fundamental values and their approach to parenthood and survival in a post-apocalyptic world. On the one hand, there is Malorie who argues that 'every single decision she has made for them' so that 'they will survive,' while, on the other, Tom emphasizes that 'surviving is not living,' that they, as parents, 'need to promise them dreams that may never come true.' Here, Tom points out the family unit's need for emotional intimacy and, most importantly, hope for the future, values that have a significant resemblance to the ones of the man in *The Road*, whose own strategies are tailored to spark hope and defeat the boy's experience of nihilism. As a result, this parental strategy operates to enhance the family's connection positively and encourage hope for the time to come.

As the story progresses, there is a clear transition that takes place; from Malorie interrupting storytelling to she herself utilizing it as a strategy to regroup with her children. Upon being separated, the Girl is too afraid of Malorie to return to her and illustrates the negative side effects of Malorie's harsh parenting style. Malorie's approach, designed with the intention to protect, has unintentionally placed the family unit in greater danger as the Girl's association to her mother with punishment results in evasion. The fear of losing her children becomes the catalyst for Malorie adapting the storytelling, as she identifies its purpose of sparking hope and establishing emotional intimacy. While this approach falls under the thesis' categorization as a 'strategy,' it is perhaps more accurate to describe it as a personal epiphany as much as a method to connect with her children. It is the moment in which Malorie fully recognizes what aspects of parenthood that has been neglected. It is a shift in focus, from limitations, rules, and punishment to memories and hope one can create, build, and encourage.

In the scene in the forest, Malorie is not merely parroting Tom, and she engages with storytelling in a manner that is vulnerable, confessional, and direct. To illustrate, she says.

I was wrong. I shouldn't have been so harsh. I shouldn't have stopped you from playing. I shouldn't have ended Tom's story because it wasn't finished. When he climbed to the very top of that giant oak tree, he saw the most beautiful things. He saw hundreds of children playing games. Hundreds. And he saw birds, all different colored birds and he saw us. He saw us from the very top. He saw us together and we have to be together. And it's not just a story. It's not, because I have so much I want to show you. I have so much I want you to see. Okay? But we have to do it together, okay?

This piece of dialogue encapsulates the thematic focal point of the story, as Malorie apologizes for past mistakes, promises a better time to come, and emphasizes the importance of staying together. It is vital to highlight how Malorie cries 'there is so much I want you to see,' at the end of the narrative revolving around protecting ones' sight and limiting the children from most activities. Another layer to this scene is Malorie's modification to Tom's story, who initially said that '[he] saw a nest with five birds sitting on the top branch, and then they just flew away.' A small, interesting detail lies in the number of birds, five, which could be interpreted as one bird representing each family member and, if Malorie got pregnant again, another member to come. However, instead of retelling the story, she alters it by adding that Tom saw children playing and birds, and most importantly, he sees the family unit staying together. Here, we see Malorie utilizing storytelling to make amends through a promise for the future. As a result, the family comes together with a focus on what is ahead, in a hopeful manner, abandoning their previous default nature of fear and punishment.

As a film adaptation, Malerman's *Bird Box* became the subject of many creative changes made by screenplay writer Eric Heisserer and director Susanne Bier. In contrast to the adaptation of McCarthy's *The Road*, little to no dialogue was directly transferred onto the screen, there were significant changes to the plot, and it modified the family unit at the centre. There are many reasons behind these changes, such as Josh Malerman's lack of stature as a writer in comparison to Bier's experience as a director, who at the time had worked in the industry twenty-five years. It is also important to highlight that *Bird Box* was Malerman's debut novel and sold the film adaptation rights before the novel had hit the shelves. The author has since then published four more novels and over a dozen short stories.

In relation to adaptation theory, Malerman's debut novel is not being treated as a 'canonical text,' a term utilized by Thomas Leitch in *Film Adaptations and its Discontents* to describe how the literary source is, for some critics, considered the true depiction of the story,



placing a greater value on literary texts. In turn, Leitch argues that this approach would 'ignore fifty years of adaptation theory in their uncritical adoption of the author's intention as a criterion for the success of both the novel and any possible film adaptation.'<sup>159</sup> In the novel, Malerman depicts a story of a young mother who resorts to desperate parental strategies to save her children, and it is a process deeply affected by her own insecurity as she is the only parent, alone in any decision-making. In the process of adaptation, the novel depiction is treated as a basis from which the screenwriter and director explore the road less travelled, by altering parts of the story, such as the modification to the core family unit, changing parental strategies and through a conflict between Malorie and Tom, explores the ethical dilemmas of parenthood and upbringing in a post-apocalyptic world.

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<sup>159</sup> Leitch, Thomas. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to the Passion of the Christ*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. p 2

Chapter Five Conclusion: The Embodied Hope of Children

A prominent thematic element in the Post-Apocalyptic genre is the extinction of humanity, or at least, the destruction life as they know it. The man in *The Road* touches upon this subject, and it is written, ‘names of things slowly following [a raw core of parsable entities] into oblivion... More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already?’.<sup>160</sup> Naturally, the parents in both stories mourn the destruction of their old world, of their homes and relations, and therefore spend significant time looking back at what has been lost. From what I have discussed, it now seems clear that the children have a tremendously positive effect on their parental figures, as they impose a need to look ahead in preparation for the future and require guidance, love, and knowledge to move forward. In addition, children in-and-of-themselves offer a promise of hope simply by staying alive, hence operating as an embodiment of hope. However, their impact on the family unit and narrative cannot simply be reduced their heartbeats, and it is also the children’s curious, compassionate, and creative nature that operates as a driving force. In many ways, they represent the future as their generation will, hopefully, live to rebuild society and ensure the survival of humanity.

The previous chapters have examined alternative parental strategies in post-apocalyptic fiction, by comparing and contrasting techniques utilized in McCarthy’s *The Road* and Malerman’s *Bird Box*, alongside their respective film adaptations by Hillcoat and Bier. In this chapter, I will investigate the children’s role and impact on the family unit, and examine how they symbolize/operate as the embodiment of hope in a world that is otherwise in literal and moral ruins. Said hope is represented particularly through the children’s display of survival adaptability, compassion/empathy, and wonder. Instilling embodied hope is a result of successful parental strategies. It is useful to consider the arguments this chapter in relation to Maslow’s famous Hierarchy of Needs, as each point to be discussed (survival adaptability, compassion, and wonder) essentially fulfils each of the three categories.

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<sup>160</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p 93

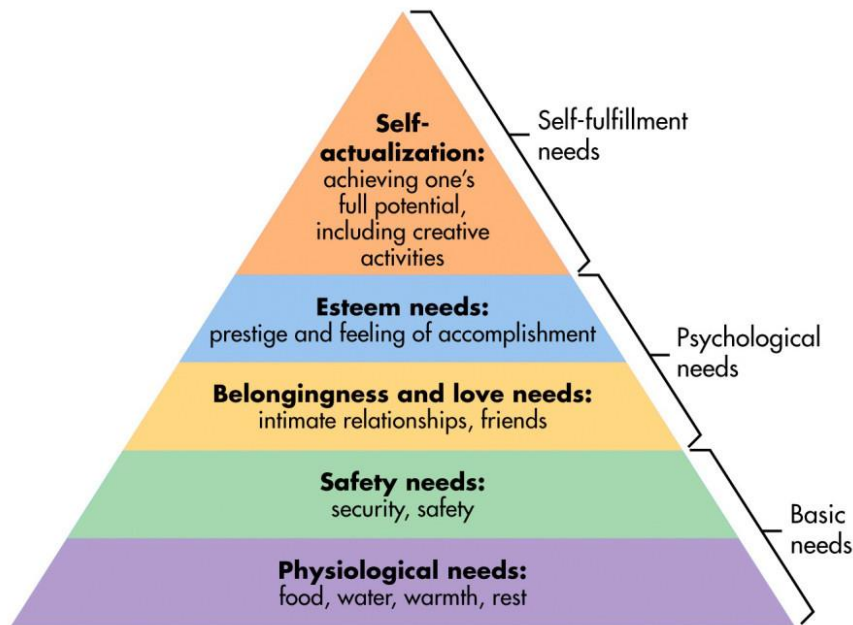


Figure X: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Source: Mcleod, Saul. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Simply Psychology. Simply Psychology, March 20, 2020. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

## Survival Adaptability

First, the children must acquire skillsets to prepare them for the future. Survival adaptability is dependent on the child's age, as each age-group faces specific challenges, such as the experience of mental health issues. The boy in *The Road* is struggling with nihilism and expresses a wish for being dead. After the loss of his mother, he mourns for her and wishes they were reunited in heaven. In response, the father spends a tremendous effort relighting the boy's fighting spirit, or 'fire.' To illustrate, the father teaches the boy about the importance of shielding oneself from unnecessary, grim images by stating: 'Just remember that the things you put into your head is there forever... You might want to think about that... You forget what you want to remember and remember what you want to forget.'<sup>161</sup> The boy struggles to acquire this skill, as shown when they come across a field of charred corpses that assumedly were caught in a firestorm, grimly depicted as 'figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling' and the boy comments how 'it's okay [to see]. They're already there.'<sup>162</sup> Here it is illustrated how the boy is 'strangely untroubled,' as it is implied, he has grown numb to the horrific scenery.<sup>163</sup> However, upon discovering a 'charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on [a] spit,' the boy later apologizes for his earlier

<sup>161</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p 11

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p 203

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. p 203

comments, and appears to adopt a more vigilant attitude to protect himself for horrifying images, and also his mental health.<sup>164</sup> This is an important display of survival adaptability, as the boy can change his perception and alter his behaviour. Additionally, it is likely to help fend off his experience of nihilism.

The children in Malerman's *Bird Box* display a strong sense of adaptability by suppressing their natural impulses to play, disobey rules and act spontaneously, by focusing on their listening skills. This skill is essential, as the children play a tremendous role in the success of their journey on the river. In the novel, Malerman's emphasizes how the children are able to detect and identify twenty different sounds and can even distinguish between different facial expressions based on the subjects breathing alone.<sup>165</sup> Traditionally, the children's age group (4-5 year-olds) should be able to stay focused on a minor task for two to four minutes. Dependent on the task, they may be able to focus up to twenty minutes.<sup>166</sup> Despite their cognitive disadvantage, the children sharpen their listening skills and spend the majority of the three-day voyage on alert, notifying Malorie of creatures, animals, and people nearby.

The children's display of survival adaptability is fundamental as it expresses their understanding of fulfilling basic needs and protecting themselves. Despite their age, each child shows an ability to suppress their natural, child behaviour to focus on a task or fending off threats. Although, this behaviour is unmistakably facilitated for their parental figures, who also thoroughly assists in maintaining the children's awareness – such as when Malorie reminds the children to be quiet to listen, or when the father instructs the boy to hold the gun. Nevertheless, this cooperation is important to ensure the survival of the family unit and prepare the children for the time to come.

## **Compassion**

The stories are also profoundly influenced by the family's expression of compassion and empathy. This is most prominent in McCarthy's novel, as the boy thoroughly expresses a deep understanding of the experience and needs of others. However, while this is his greatest strength, it is initially also his greatest weakness, as many may attempt to take advantage of his kindness. Hence, the father spends a significant time instilling a self-defence awareness.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid. p 212-213

<sup>165</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 95, 146 & 190

<sup>166</sup> O'Hanlon, Leslie Harris, and Leslie Harris O'Hanlon. "How to Improve Attention Spans." Parents.. <https://www.parents.com/kids/development/intellectual/how-to-improve-attention-spans/>.

While it is not as frequent in Malerman's novel, one can still identify moments where the children express a need to understand, connect with, and protect the ones around them. Hence, their display of compassion and empathy illustrates their desire to connect with those around them and taps into the second category of Maslow's pyramid, psychological needs.

Fundamentally, humans are social beings and have a natural need to connect with those around them, a notion that is challenging in post-apocalyptic scenarios.

For this section, I will address the children's display of 'prosocial behaviour', a term frequently used in developmental psychology and is defined as 'voluntary behaviour intended to benefit another, such as helping, sharing, comforting, and donating.'<sup>167</sup> Here, I will evaluate how the children express compassion towards members of their family unit and other survivors, hence illustrating their ability to connect with those around them. Compassion is closely linked with empathy and sympathy, and Singer and Lamm distinguishes between the terms as:

The crucial distinction between the term *empathy* and those like *sympathy*, [and] sympathy... is that empathy denotes that the observer's emotions reflect affective sharing ('feeling with' the other person) while... sympathy... denotes the observer's emotions are inherently other oriented ('feeling for' the other person).<sup>168</sup>

While empathy and sympathy are essential to human interaction and prominent in both stories, I have chosen to focus specifically on compassion, as it involves a next step – a desire to aid, help, or comfort. Richard S. Lazarus argues how 'the core relational theme for compassion... is being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help.'<sup>169</sup> Compassion holds an essential role and impact to post-apocalyptic stories, that takes place in a world that is otherwise deprived of compassionate expression, where many resorts to theft, violence, or even cannibalism. While many survivors may have lost faith in human kindness, the children's display of compassion illustrates that said human kindness is not eradicated, but rather temporarily suppressed due to fear and desperation. The children represent a fresh start, a promise of a better future, as compassion will emerge with the next generation.

In McCarthy's *The Road*, a significant element to the story is boy's kindness, and how his compassion essentially operates as a counterweight to the chaos and absolute misery. To illustrate, when they meet Ely, the boy is quick to identify his feelings of loneliness and

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<sup>167</sup> Spinrad, Tracy L., and Nancy Eisenberg. "Compassion in Children." Oxford Handbooks Online, May 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190464684.013.5>.

<sup>168</sup> Singer, Tania, and Claus Lamm. "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1156, no. 1 (2009): 81-96. Page 84

<sup>169</sup> Lazarus, R. S. *Emotion and adaptation*. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991) Page 289

misery and takes his hand, despite his father's instructions not to. It is a simple but important act of compassion as the boy guides the partly blind Ely to camp, after having convinced his father to share a meal with him. Furthermore, the boy's compassion is shown when he sees a stranger struck by lightning, and, identifying his pain, wants to offer him food – to which the man refuses, saying 'can't help him' as he knows the man will die from his injury and they must preserve their rations.<sup>170</sup> In both scenes, the boy can detect and identify another person's negative emotional experience, quickly followed by a desire to help and ease their suffering. Although it is important to note that the boy's willingness to share his rations may jeopardize his chances for survival, and hence the man must operate as the voice of reason and limit his compassionate expressions when necessary. Here, the man expresses a higher level of differentiation, in contrast to the boy who is fundamentally guided by his emotion.

As discussed in chapter three, John Hillcoat's interpretation of *The Road* closely follows the literary source; therefore it is challenging to point out specific scenes that is not present in the book. However, Kodi Smit-McPhee's interpretation of the role of the boy presents him as more vocal and determined, especially in the scene involving the thief. Here, the boy's original quiet protests are exchanged by clear shouting, insisting that they return the thief's clothes and a can of food. Furthermore, when the boy witnesses a boy his age, the literary depiction describes how the boy cries and, fearing that he may not have someone to take care of him, suggests that '[he'd] give that little boy half of [his] food.'<sup>171</sup> In its film adaptation, the boy loudly protests and even puts up a fight as the father attempts to carry him away.<sup>172</sup> Overall, the boy expresses a passion for helping those who are left fortunate, and it is a key attribute to his character and expression of compassion.

Malerman's *Bird Box* presents itself with some challenges identifying moments of compassion in the children, as they are only part in a smaller part of the narrative, and when present, are instructed by Malorie to remain quiet and listen, hence limiting their expressions. Nonetheless, their compassion is detected in rare moments on their voyage on the river. On their journey, Malorie is injured and struggles to row the boat, and the Boy offer to help. To illustrate, it is written; 'suddenly, the Boy's hand is upon hers... his fingers over hers, he moves, with her...in all this cold, painful world, the Boy, hearing her struggle, is helping her now.'<sup>173</sup> The Boy breaks away from Malorie's instructions to listen, in order to help her and,

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<sup>170</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p 51

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. p 90

<sup>172</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD

<sup>173</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 191-192

as he makes a point out of touching her hand rather than grab the oar, shows compassion through that physical contact, too. Additionally, when Malorie eventually faints from fatigue, the children interpret it as if she has fallen asleep and temporarily steers the boat, and even had to get the boat unstuck. This distinction, how the children believe their mother is sleeping, is tremendously important, as it further enhances their notion of compassion. Instead of attempting to wake their mother, they temporarily take charge of managing the boat, to allow their mother to rest. Here, it illustrates how it is a conscious decision rather than one that is forced upon them if they had discovered that Malorie had fainted and thereby unable to wake up.

In the film adaptation, directed by Susanne Bier, there is a key change made to the plotline that prompts what may be interpreted as a compassionate response. As a part of their journey on the river, one member of the family must take off their blindfolds to navigate the boat through the rapids, and it must be one of the children, as if something happens to Malorie, they will likely not survive at all. This impossible decision looms over the family unit, as it essentially entails the potential sacrifice of one of the children. When discussing the matter, the children take notice of their mother's distress, and the Girl volunteers to look, then followed by then Boy. The children attempt to relieve their mother of the emotional strain of deciding for her, willingly sacrificing themselves for the survival of the family. Malorie refuses, however, and in the end, she decides that no one will look and that they will face the situation blindly, together.

In both stories, arching over two literary books and film adaptations, illustrate the children's expression of compassion; a desire to help and support those around them. While most survivors express distrust to strangers, which is a natural response to protect oneself, the young naturally counter the otherwise hostile environment. Much of this expression lies in young naïve innocent nature of children, which is the exact reason why they present the parental figures with a focus and the world a second chance. Their desire to connect with others, relieve pain, and help are key skills that fulfil Maslow's description of psychological needs, as they form relationships with those around them.

## **Wonder**

As the basic and psychological needs are met through the children's display of survival adaptability and compassion, they can reach even further by expressing curiosity and wonder for the world around them. This is, I would argue, essential to the rebuilding of

society, as the children will naturally look ahead on what may be created, or rebuild, rather than looking back at what has been lost. It is the urge to explore, understand, and create that has operated as a driving force for humanity throughout history. At the heart of most progression is to make the world better for the next generation, who will again build upon that foundation in preparation for the following one. In this last section of this section, I will address the children's expression of wonder and curiosity and how it arguably taps into Maslow's third category of self-fulfilment.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the boy frequently asks questions about their surroundings and how things used to operate, such as when they come across an old dam, and the father explains how it was once used to generate electricity. Here, the boy illustrates a wish to learn how society used to operate and understand its functions. Furthermore, the boy shows curiosity to learn how to read maps to navigate their travels on the road, and questions the functions of states, how long the roads will exist and whether the ocean may still be blue.<sup>174</sup> His curiosity and frequent questions communicate a desire to learn, understand and grow, and, most importantly, show how the world has yet to crush his sense of wonder, which may induce a crushing sense of hopelessness that would otherwise hinder him.

This notion of wonder is further illustrated in Hillcoat's adaptation, in an added scene where the father and son wander through a town, and the boy discovers a beetle in between the rubble.<sup>175</sup> It is a rare moment of wonder and amazement shared between them; the boy sees an insect assumedly for the first time, and the man sees one for the first time in years, as the unnamed event has wiped out all crops and wildlife. This scene further underlines the boy's expression of wonder, as he picks it up to show his father, and they, together, watch it fly away. The beetle may imply a hope for restoration, which is further enhanced by the boy's identification of its worth and initial wonder upon finding it. Lastly, the boy's optimism and wonder are expressed as he questions the veteran whether his group has children, a scene that takes place in both the literary and film adaptation. Essentially, it shows a desire to build relations to children his age, with whom he will face the future to come.

While Malerman's novel *Bird Box* does not present a significant portion of scenes illustrating the children's expression of wonder, it is detected in the final pages of the novel when the family has reached the sanctuary. When Malorie takes off their blindfolds, the

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<sup>174</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p 43, 44 & 194

<sup>175</sup> *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat. (Dimension Films and 2929 Productions, 2009) Blu-ray DVD



children ‘stare in awe...Neither cries [nor] complains,’ and express a curiosity for their new surroundings.<sup>176</sup> In contrast to the boy in *The Road*, the children have never met another person outside their family unit. Despite their limited social interactions and exposure to new places, directly caused by supernatural creatures imposing suicidal tendencies and hence placing them a great psychological pressure, they still show a curiosity for the world around them. This positive reaction is aided by their survival adaptability, which arguably helped them preserve their compassion and wonder.

This is further highlighted when Malorie finally names the children, Tom and Olympia, as they do not act indifferent but happy. Many people, adults, and children alike, respond to emotional, physical, or psychological trauma by developing an emotional numbness, which is a natural response the body initiates to protect itself. As Mayra Mendes, Ph.D. and licensed psychotherapist, explains, ‘while emotional numbing blocks or shuts down negative feelings and experiences, it also shuts down the ability to experience pleasure, engage in positive interactions and social activities, and interferes with openness for intimacy...’<sup>177</sup> However, despite their strict upbringing and traumatic experiences, the children do not appear to be experiencing emotional numbness, as illustrated by their excitement of being given names. Their reactions are depicted as follows; ‘The Girl looks at Malorie quickly. She blushes. She smiles. She likes it... [The Boy] grins, shy and happy.’<sup>178</sup> This reaction arguably taps into the children's sense of wonder, as they have an optimistic attitude towards the future, equipped with a name and identity.

In the film adaptation, directed by Susanne Bier, this scene is further built upon as Malorie encourages the children to play.<sup>179</sup> It is a rare display of emotional intimacy after Malorie names the children and brands herself a mother, which is further highlighted by the children’s excitement. Finally, Malorie sets the children free, free from the strict routines and listening duties required to survive the journey, as they now have the freedom to play with other children, and explore. Despite never having seen other children besides each other, they display an eager curiosity to befriend the other children in their sanctuary. It displays wonder

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<sup>176</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 376

<sup>177</sup> Lindberg, Sara. “What Is Emotional Numbing?” Verywell Mind, April 4, 2020. <https://www.verywellmind.com/emotional-numbing-symptoms-2797372>.

<sup>178</sup> Malerman, Josh. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 377

<sup>179</sup> Bier, Susanne, dir. *Bird Box*. Netflix, 2018.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80196789?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C07507958d67e6c4a7145b06ead068d31f2ed8a5f%3A22fe2d3368d60a57f9596eb462498a1a6f441c82%2C%2C>

in a different manner as presented in *The Road*, as the children strive for creativity and creating relationships with fellow survivors, with whom they may rebuild society to come.

### **Conclusion**

For four chapters, this thesis has investigated alternative parental strategies in Post-Apocalyptic fiction, some of which have engaged the audience in an encouraging manner, or has provoked. The family units in the two novels have tremendously different dynamics overall; with the man and the boy in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* focus on emotional intimacy, in contrast to Malorie and her children in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box* emphasizing emotional distance to ensure survival. Each parental figure responds to threats in their way, as a result of the nature of the dangers and their capability. In closing, I will address how the parental strategies have engaged the audience, and how each story suggests the reorganization of society to come.

Most of the parental strategies have engaged the audience in a positive and encouraging manner. This is most prominent in McCarthy's *The Road* and its respective film adaptation directed by John Hillcoat, as the father, with great passion and grit, works tirelessly to encourage his son. Much of the parental guidance and encouragement lies in key, reoccurring phrases, such as 'carrying the fire' or 'okay' that invites emotional intimacy and alights a fighting spirit. They operate as a constant reminder to 'keep trying...to never give up,' simultaneously while the father is suffering and frequently wishes he was dead, yet keeps going to ensure his son's survival, acknowledging that 'the boy was all that stood between him and death.'<sup>180</sup> It is the father's grit and perseverance that enforces a positive change in the boy, who goes on to live with another family after his passing.

While Josh Malerman's novel does not prominently contain encouraging parental strategies, as much focus is placed on limiting the children's spontaneous expression and heightening their auditory senses; it is included in the film adaptation directed by Susanne Bier. This change is a direct result of Tom's involvement in the family unit, as he introduces storytelling as a way of giving the children hopes and dreams for the future. Here, there is a focus on Malorie's character development as she must overcome her fears and fully take on her role as a mother and eventually adapts Tom's parental strategy to regroup with her

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<sup>180</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p 29

children and find the sanctuary together. In the end, the narrative ends on a positive note as the Malorie turns to each child and encourage them to go play with the other children.

Not all parental strategies have been positive, as some were designed to prepare the children for the harsh, unforgiving environment. In *The Road*, the most prominent example in the novel and film alike is the father instructing the boy to utilize the gun, and specifically to teach him how to commit suicide when faced with an inescapable threat. As a parental strategy, it is provoking, as it forces the boy to come to face the cruel reality instead of shielding him from it, protecting him from the emotional trauma. However, as the man knows he is dying from his illness, the father must prepare the boy for a future when he is no longer present. As the reality is that brutal, it may even have been more provoking had the father not taught the boy how to use the pistol, as he would have been defenceless.

In Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*, the training regime contained many episodes involving verbal abuse or even physical violence, to scare the children into obedience.<sup>181</sup> As discussed in chapter three, Malorie relies heavily on their natural reflexes, especially when she trained the children to wake with their eyes closed.<sup>182</sup> As a parental strategy, it will naturally provoke the audience, as a maternal figure frequently inflicts pain on her children in the name of protecting them. Nevertheless, it does teach an unquestionably important skill in a world where the greatest threat to their life is viewing a monster.

As post-apocalyptic narratives, both stories involve a natural disaster and social upheaval that destroys society, leaving the remaining family units to develop alternate methods of protecting their children while also preparing them for the future. Each story presents its own suggestion of the reorganization of society. Both narratives end in a hopeful manner, as the remainder each family unit become part of another group of survivors. To illustrate, the boy in McCarthy's *The Road*, end up joining another family unit, consisting of a father, a mother and a little boy and girl. While the father and the boy have spent most of the novel avoiding 'the bad guys' while also hoping to find 'the good guys,' the boy becomes a member of a family who have actively chosen to live honourably, and who have not resorted to cannibalism. The family unit in Malerman's *Bird Box* becomes a part of a larger community, one that has constructed security measures and has food supplies through growing crops. This is a significant transition for the children, who have grown up without

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<sup>181</sup>Josh Malerman. *Bird Box*. (London: Harper Voyager, 2018.) p 93-94

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. p 94

any human contact besides their family unit. The ending is hopeful, as it illustrates how it is possible to construct a community, hence alluding to the chances of rebuilding society. Both stories have a social framework, in the form of a family unit or community, in which the children are protected and nurtured as they grow up.

The existence of children calls out a need for parental guidance and protection, which becomes a focal point amidst the chaos and fuels a sense of purpose. These children have a significantly positive influence on their parents as they encourage the family unit to look forward in preparation for the future instead of only looking back at what has been lost or left behind. The embodied hope of children, with their direct engagement with survival adaptability, compassion, and wonder, is a result of successful parental strategies. While neither story offers a definite proof of the reconstruction of society, each does end in a hopeful, forward-looking, and determined manner, with the children's potential as a common point of focus. Hopefully, this will be the dawning of a new age, with the reconstruction of society.

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