

Lit Log #4
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9 December 2022

Close Reading of a Passage

“Odd things scattered by the side of the road. Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths. Even a year ago the boy might sometimes pick up something and carry it with him for a while but he didnt do that any more. They sat and rested and drank the last of their good water and left the plastic jerry jug standing in the road. The boy said: If we had that little baby it could go with us. Yes. It could.

Where did they find it?

He didnt answer.

Could there be another one somewhere? I dont know. It's possible.” (200)

This passage comes when the man and the boy make their way through an old mill town near a river they've just camped by. The day prior, they came across something disturbing: a seemingly abandoned encampment, but upon closer inspection, the headless body of an infant blackening on a spit, presumably to be the meal for whoever left the campsite. The boy was so upset by witnessing this that the man wondered if “he'd ever speak again” (199). Typical to other traumatic events the two experience, it's later, during the passage highlighted, that the boy begins to verbally process what he's seen.

McCarthy does an incredible job of connecting physical descriptions of setting with more figurative language about the condition of the man, the boy, and the world. In the beginning of this passage, he paints a picture of a road littered with objects of the past. In using the word “pilgrims” to describe the people who had once owned these objects, he creates an image of a mass migration, assumedly away from whatever horror that ended the world. He then clarifies that the mass migration is in fact towards their deaths, and it illustrates a scenario where there was no escaping whatever killed them.

Another powerful tool used throughout the book is the depiction of the passage of time. It's never expressly stated how much time they've been on the road, or how long it's been since the end of the world, but it's meant to feel as though their time in the wilderness is endless. In this passage, McCarthy alludes to something that might've happened a year ago, a rare moment where he uses a specific unit of time. “Even a year ago the boy might sometimes pick up something and carry it with him for a while but he didnt do that any more.” This shows that the boy's innocence and excitement for life, however small it might have been to begin with, is dwindling with time. He's not only aging, but he's become more exhausted, more depressed, and perhaps ready to die. Since this is a change from the past year, McCarthy clarifies that the year has been particularly bad and in doing so raises the question: how much longer can the two go on?

When they stop to rest and finish the last of their water, the boy finally brings up the headless baby they had seen earlier, now a day after the encounter. Much of the boy's dialogue throughout the story comes in the form of incessant questions, which isn't uncommon for a young boy speaking to his father. He uses these questions to rationalize the apocalyptic world around him, often asking if they are still “the

good guys,” or asking why or how things happen the way they do. In this scene, it seems that he wants to make sure that he and his father would never be so evil as to burn a baby. The boy’s instinct to protect others is depicted through the questions he asks, exemplified in this passage and throughout the whole book.