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The Importance of Ely

The Road by Cormac McCarthy is the story of how humanity operates on a desolate earth. It follows two characters The man and the boy throughout their journey to the south, where they encounter other survivors and deal with their own morals and humanity. However, one survivor they encounter changes the dynamic of the duo's journey. This character is Ely. In the story, he just appears walking like the duo and the boy pities him so he gives him some food. And throughout this interaction, multiple symbols are revealed.

One of these symbols is his "Name" Ely. Throughout the novel, McCarthy spread religious imagery and symbols in order to emphasize the question of how faith would last in a barren world. And the name Ely is one of those symbols. The name Ely is a nod to Eli a biblical prophet from the book of Samuel. However, McCarthy flips this on its head and uses Ely to be some kind of Anti-prophet. Throughout the conversation, he has with the man he seems to express his disbelief in a higher power. "I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen. What if I said that he's a god? The old man shook his head. I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant 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. Everybody. Sure. We'll all be better off. We'll all breathe easier." Unlike his biblical counterpart, he embraces the doubts in religion and uses that to spread the message of the antagonistic state of the world.

Another role that McCarthy has Ely play is a test for both character's beliefs. Ely plays more into this anti-prophet role and predicts the tribulations that await both characters. When talking to the man he thinks about his mortality and its effect on the boy. "He thought about the old man out there somewhere. He looked back at the camp through the black palings of the trees. He hoped the boy had gone back to sleep. He knelt there wheezing softly, his hands on his knees. I am going to die, he said. Tell me how I am to do that." After the man's interaction with Ely he starts to wonder about his fate and how it will affect the boy's life. Another problem that Ely makes aware is the boys kindness and how it could be taken advantage of. He points out that

here “You should thank him you know, the man said. I wouldnt have given you anything. Maybe I should and maybe I shouldnt. Why wouldnt you? I wouldnt have given him mine. You dont care if it hurts his feelings? Will it hurt his feelings? No. That's not why he did it. Why did he do it? He looked over at the boy and he looked at the old man. You wouldnt understand, he said. I'm not sure I do. Maybe he believes in God. I dont know what he believes in. He'll get over it. No he wont. The old man didnt answer. He looked around at the day.” He predicts of the boy innocence and this cause a change in the boy being more reserved and less trusting.

In writing out the character Ely; McCarthy allows readers to experience the doubts of faith and survival in the posthumous world. He serves his purpose as a prophet but subverts the expectation of being faithful but preching the reality of the world.