

CLOSE READING

“Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy's age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside ground with pick and mattock and brought to light a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day. The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers.” (188)

The Road by Cormac MacCarthy is a chilling tale of a father and son's journey in an apocalyptic world. Told from the father's point of view, the ongoing narration of their travels is interjected with the father's memories of a life before.

In the months that they are walking down the road, at one point the man gets sick. His boy is not much use during this, he can only sit and watch his feverish father. When the man is feeling well enough to get up, he wanders to the top of the hill they've stopped on and looks at the land below. The passage that follows is a memory.

McCarthy does not use any colors in the man's recollection of a pit of snakes being burned alive. His description relies on incredibly detailed and gruesome metaphors. By comparing the snakes to “the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day,” McCarthy shows readers the man's view of natural phenomena. He did not see the snakes as threatening, unlike the others around him. Instead he saw them as part of a collective. The snakes are “the bowels of some great beast,” meaning on their own, they are not a threat. Combined with other factors they are. Just the bowels of a beast are not dangerous, but the beast itself is. This theory parallels the man and boy's experience traveling on the road. They are more wary of larger groups than the singular person.

In the memory, the man describes himself as “The boy's age. A little older.” This suggests that he is remembering this moment and how he felt as a way to connect with his son. The man recalls feeling sympathy for the dying snakes. “As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves.” In this scenario, he as a boy is separate from “the men.” He has connected with the snakes, and realized that they are only being burned as a pretense. The snakes symbolize a greater “evil” in need of extinguishing. Throughout the book, the boy outwardly emotes more than the man. He fights against his father's ethics of not trusting anyone. Fire, ash, and burnt bodies frequent the man and boy's lives. At one point they have to walk past a man that has been struck by lightning. The boy desperately wants to help him, and the man has to explain that there's nothing they can do. The boy has a heart that only someone who has not known the previous world

could have, similar to how the man as a young child did not believe that the snakes deserved to die. The strong emotions they feel connect the man's younger self to his own child, which allows him to effectively parent.