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A Story Without Names

The Function of Nameless Characters in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Theodor Myrestrand

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Supervisor: Cecilia Wadsö-Lecaros

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) follows a father and his son as they try to outrun the winter following a cataclysmic event that has eradicated most life in America. The two protagonists remain nameless throughout the entirety of the novel and the same can be said about the other characters they encounter along the way apart from one outlier who lies about his name being "Ely". This essay examines what kind of functions the nameless characters of *The Road* have for the narrative while also analysing how this restriction of characterization can be a useful tool in terms of storytelling as well as in marketing. I also argue that the namelessness of *The Road* is not restricted to the lack of personal names exclusively and that by withholding the names of locations and landmarks the readers can even better engage themselves and deepen their involvement in the story. By using contemporary sources related to the meaning and symbolism behind names in literature and by also highlighting other works with the same lack of personal names, I examine and present my findings on how the lack of personal names in *The Road* can relate to a crumbling society, personal identity, marketing and religion

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1. Introduction

In 2006, Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* was published, a deeply harrowing, bleak and sombre tale which was quickly considered to be a modern American classic. The novel, which promptly garnered international renown and attention, going as far as to win the 2007 Pulitzer Prize, was successfully made into a film by the same name in 2009, only three years after its release (Hage, 15-16). *The Road* tells the story of a determined but sickly man and his cowardly yet kindhearted son as they trudge through an ash-filled post-apocalyptic America in order to reach the sea before the winter sets in. On the journey, they encounter many dangers which take the form of raiders, cannibals, starvation and sickness while also struggling with maintaining hope as they try to push through the desperation and temptation of simply giving up. As of now, it is the last novel published by Cormac McCarthy and while it has been discussed and explored from many perspectives, be it for its religious symbolism or its depiction of America, less attention has been given to the novel's lack of personal names.

The two protagonists of the story are simply referred to as "the boy" and "the man" by the narrator and every character they meet along the way are given nicknames relating to their physical appearance as in "the old man" or "the woman". These simple, observational nicknames can arguably enhance the sense of emptiness and detachment in the ash-filled world of *The Road*. While a full cast of characters remaining nameless throughout a work of literature is quite rare, it has been done by several other authors, and they seem to differentiate in dealing with their respective characters in vastly different ways. In *Blindness* (1995) by José Saramago, all the characters lose their eyesight due to a disease and begin to refer to each other by their respective roles in their newly founded society or by their distinct physical traits. Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) is set in Ireland during The Troubles and tells the story of a character simply referred to as "middle-sister". As the story is told from this "middle-sister", every character in the novel have names that explain the relation they have with the protagonist with examples like "boyfriend", "mother" or as the title suggests: "milkman". McCarthy has introduced readers to unnamed characters prior to *The Road* in his earlier works like *Blood Meridian* (1985), where the protagonist is simply called "the kid". *The Road* was, however, his first novel that avoids personal names for every character in the story. While certainly not the first novel to rid itself from the regular convention of having personal names for characters and also undoubtedly having been inspired by other authors' works, *The Road* has itself stood as a source of inspiration on its own for other novelists attempting to write stories in new and

exciting ways. Novels like *The Road* that are able to tell expansive stories about several characters while also exploring ideas concerning humanity, morality, religion and identity, and ultimately doing so without giving any characters in it a proper name is a rare occurrence in the world of literature.

While there is an abundance of material and research available on the symbolic and psychological meaning of names in literature, there is a clear lack of research and attention on the topic of namelessness, particularly in situations where personal names are absent and replaced with generic pronouns and nicknames based on appearance. The symbolism and function of the nameless characters of *The Road* is often only mentioned as a minor part of research surrounding the many other aspects of the novel but I believe that exploring the namelessness of these characters could be an important part of research on literary names and identity as a whole and for that, I believe it warrants an investigation of its own. The purpose of this thesis is to examine what function the namelessness of the characters in *The Road* have for the overall narrative while also investigating the various ways that the removal of such a crucial part of characterization can work to the author's advantage in regard to storytelling. I believe that in order to grasp the essence of literary namelessness, one must look at the meaning and symbolic nature of names, how they are used in literature, as well as how they can add to a reader's expectations for a story.

In the following two sections I will be providing an account of the importance and function of names in literature, and afterwards discuss the changes that occur when names are absent from a story by looking at how *The Road* distinguishes between its characters without the use of names. Further on there will be a section on style and structure as well as the novel's use of empty space in order to more deeply involve the reader in the story before I begin to consider how nameless characters can have a function in saying something about society itself and what namelessness can mean in terms of identity and self-perception. From there on I argue how the novel's lack of names relates to marketing and also to what degree it can be used as a tool for keeping the reader's attention, until I finally touch on the religious aspect of naming and how certain characters in the novel can correlate to biblical figures. Looking at these different aspects could prove to be a crucial part to uncover what role namelessness plays in literature as a whole and at the very least assist in creating a base for further discussion on the topic. I will then finish with a brief conclusion where I summarize the findings and give my final thoughts and reflection on the subject.

2. Personal Names in Literature

In order for a story to be both engaging and purposeful, there is an inherent need for characters, as “we remember characters from stories long after we’ve forgotten plot, language, and theme” (Taylor, 42). While fictional characters can differ vastly from one another in terms of traits, attributes, desires and shortcomings, most of them share a common feature, a personal name. Names of fictional characters are unquestionably the result of an author’s conscious as well as unconscious observations, inspirations and experiences. Everything one is exposed to and influenced by throughout one’s life defines that person’s own character, even in how one ascribes properties to fictional creations. Just like an idea can be planned and refined over a long period of time, it can also be sporadic, spontaneous and even accidental, and it makes sense to look at the act of coming up with names for fictional characters in the same way. Names have the ability to hold vast amounts of compact information and can have symbolic meaning, contributing to how one might interpret both the character and the story itself. In addition to this, names have historically also been used to inspire and create a sort of destiny for the proprietor of the name (Fowler, 11). It can be argued that by borrowing and preserving names from former kings, queens, legends and historical figures, it is possible to inspire and nurture the same desired attributes in others and maybe especially in one’s own offspring. The idea of this type of naming is true for literature as well and, in a more general sense, the art of naming fictional characters can be used as a tool in order to create expectations in the mind of the reader and can be used to forecast how a character will behave further on in a story. Fictional characters are often simply given an existing name that fits the traits of a character, but some names are completely made up by the authors themselves. These “imaginary” names, whilst in many cases not based on any existing, real names, can be considered compounds of previously known information. On the topic of where both existing and fictional names originate from, Martin S. Lindauer points out:

Authors take the names of fictional characters from a variety of sources, including the Bible, history, and popular culture, modify them, and invent new ones to supplement physical, mental, and behavioral descriptions of fictional characters. [...] Literary names carry affective (physiognomic) and sensory (synesthetic) properties that are suggested in their sensory and perceptual architecture: their

shapes, spaces, sizes and sounds. Names, in other words, are like titles and labels in general.

(Lindauer, 79)

As Lindauer points out, names can be linked to titles and labels in how they contain so much compact associative information in comparison to most other single words. If a character in a novel was introduced as “Arthur”, it would likely create certain expectations in a reader, even if only the name of the character is known. While different individuals will inevitably have different associations with the name, most would most likely think of attributes like chivalry, leadership, authority or even kindness by linking the name of Arthur with the legendary, mythical king of England. A name can invoke feelings of warmth, cold, joy and grief but can also reveal so much about a character as a whole whether regarding the character’s sense of authority, compassion or even morality. Personal names create different reactions from different people based on their own experiences and associations, so in a way, a fictional character’s name denotes properties from two separate aspects - the meaning behind the name from the creator’s view as well as the reader’s interpretation and understanding of the name.

Lindauer conducted an experiment that gives insight to how we as humans associate with the names of fictional characters, in other words, how we can assume and recognize whether a character might be good or evil based on the character’s name alone, not their actual actions and motivation in the text. 132 personal names of characters were gathered from a vast array of relatively unknown fictional texts to be judged by both male and female English-speaking participants on the characters’ perceived behavior. The participants were to mark each name as either “good” or “bad” based purely on their name alone. Names like Jenny Denham and Rebecca West were examples of good or positive fictional characters, while names like Madame Grosgorge and Sempronia were considered bad or negative. In general, the female judges were more successful overall in their guesses than their male counterparts and it also became apparent that it seemed easier for most to correctly guess the morality of the female characters in comparison to the male ones (Lindauer, 80). Another interesting finding was that of differences regarding how the participants regarded names not from their own culture. While the participants overall managed to be about 65% correct on names commonly found in English and American literature, they were only about 40% accurate regarding names of other combined nationalities (Lindauer, 80). The results seem to show that there is a cultural difference in what names are considered good or bad. Names like Grosgorge or Maleficent sound negative not just due to the typographical structure or phonetics of the name, but also

due to their resemblance to other negative words, namely “gross” and “malicious”. It is far easier for the participants to guess correctly when the names belong to their own culture and surroundings. Names differ from culture to culture as well as from language to language, and when there is a barrier of cultural understanding it is harder to determine the morality of a character based on a name alone. It seems safe to say that the act of naming fictional literary characters is a crucial part of what an author must do in order to engage and create expectations for a reader. What happens then, when personal names are completely absent from a story?

3. The Use of Names in *The Road*

The Road, by not having any personal names, should seemingly not have to bother with any of the psychological associations, meanings or symbolism related to fictional names, but this is not the case. While the characters remain nameless, the way McCarthy refers to them as “the man” and “the boy” makes it so the two characters can function as blank slates for the reader to project everything that can be associated with those words. What does one, for example, associate with the word *boy*? While the definition of the word is that of “a male child from birth to adulthood”, a reader might have other associations connected with the word. The word “boy” could signal innocence and purity for some while being associated with uncleanness, mischievousness and even violence for others. Readers will go into the novel with their own associations and understanding of the word and, while not even being aware of it themselves, will most likely have expectations related to the character based on that single word of reference alone. The same goes for the “man”, but there is another aspect to this in the way his son refers to him. While the narrator refers to the father as “the man”, the boy only ever calls him “papa” throughout the entirety of the story, and why would he not? While the boy’s age remains unknown to the reader, McCarthy paints a rather clear picture of a very young child who is very dependent on his father, so it is only natural for the boy to refer to his parent as “papa” and not by his proper name. Just as with personal names, readers might have completely different interpretations and associations with the word “papa”. It is theorized that the word stems naturally from the process of early language acquisition being that it is a rather simple word for very young children to say (Jakobson, 539) and some even believe that along with the word “mama” it was among the first words spoken by humans (Gosline, “Family words”). While the word “father” is more commonly seen, “papa” sees frequent use among children in

South- as well as North America. Every reader will inevitably have a different viewpoint on both the word “papa” as well as the concept of fatherhood mainly through their own relationships and so one can see that while *The Road* refrains from any personal names, a reader is likely to have just as many expectations and associations with the simple words used by McCarthy in for example “man”, “boy” and even “papa”.

While the characters that can be considered survivors in the broken world of *The Road* most likely do have names they relate to, the reader is not let in on that kind of information throughout the story. The way characters are referred to in *The Road* is quite simple. While the narrator refers to the protagonists as “the man” and “the boy”, every other character is either referred to with common pronouns as in “he” or “she”, or with observational nicknames made up by the protagonist as in “the old man” or “the woman in the window”. The boy differs in this regard in that he is the only character in the novel who refers to anyone else with an affectionate term, which would make sense both because of their parent-child relationship while also working to making it easier for the reader to understand who is talking at what point. By only focusing on two characters – the man and the boy - the story is easily told and rather straightforward even though the two do not refer to each other by their personal names. One single character stands as a partial exception to this rule. Towards the end of the novel, the two protagonists meet an old man who is also travelling down the road, presumably towards the sea. Even though they are close to running out of food the boy insists on giving the old man some of what they have. The stranger seems quite odd and bewildered and while he accepts the food handed to him, he appears to be confused and simultaneously ungrateful. At first, he seems to think that he has died and that the boy is an angel (McCarthy, 183), but he at least partially comes to his senses and has supper with the two. When the old man is asked about his name, he replies saying it is Ely, presenting the reader with the novel’s first proper name. It does, however, quickly become apparent that this is not his real name:

Is your name really Ely?

No.

You dont want to say your name.

I dont want to say it.

Why?

I couldnt trust you with it. To do something with it. I dont want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody

could say that it was me. I could be anybody. I think in times like these the less said the better. If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we'd have something to talk about. but we're not. So we dont.

(McCarthy, 182-183)

The man appears to place so much weight and importance on his name that he simply does not trust anyone with it. His name is the only real thing he has left from the old world and he seems to believe that as long as he does not tell anyone his name, it cannot be tainted by other peoples' lies or even by his own actions. The reader does not know what this character might have done prior to meeting with the father and his son, but considering how brutal and savage the world has become, and by looking at the actions of the other survivors in the novel, it is likely that he must have done quite a few abhorrent things, things he seems to regret. In the old man's view, the actions he lives with might just be connected to this "new" version of him and therefore he does not wish to lay the consequences and regret on his old, "true" self, *ergo* he provides the protagonists with no name for them to "do something with". This type of fear can be found in other works of literature as well. In Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), the character of Baker cannot remember his true name and fears that his legacy will "softly and suddenly vanish away" (Carroll, 18). As Fowler puts it, it is almost as if "a name [is] essential for existence" (Fowler, 143). Having a name is a crucial part of one's own identity and when it dissipates or is forgotten, it is as if a part of oneself dies along with it. The old man who lies about his name, however, almost seems to wish for his name to be forgotten so that he no longer has to be judged by his unspoken actions for the sake of survival.

Towards the very end of the novel the boy is left alone after his father's death, and as he walks along the road he encounters a man who is revealed to have been following him for quite a while. The stranger attempts to persuade the boy to trust him and while the boy is inclined to believe him, almost desperately so, he is still scared and doubtful. The boy finally asks the stranger if he is "carrying the fire", the same thing his father has told him they were doing throughout the novel. The boy asks the stranger:

How do I know you're one of the good guys?

You don't. You'll have to take a shot.

Are you carrying the fire?

Am I what?

Carrying the fire.
You're kind of weirded out, aren't you?
No. Just a little.
Yeah.
That's okay.
So are you?
What, carrying the fire?
Yes.
Yeah. We are.

(McCarthy, 303)

While this might seem like a naive question to ask, the stranger's simple answer seems to soothe the boy as it proves to him that the stranger shares the same goal as he and his late father have. The stranger manages to convince the boy that he can be trusted and even introduces him to what one can assume is the stranger's own family. Similar to other characters the boy has met throughout the novel, the stranger does not reveal his name. As name is often the first thing one introduces oneself with, it would seem that giving the boy his name would be the most natural thing to do in this situation, yet even here the novel's restriction on revealing names persists. The stranger tries to convince the boy to calm down, put down his firearm and even join his party, so telling his name would presumably only help with achieving that outcome. The namelessness of this final stranger is one of the main factors in what makes the ending of the novel so ambiguous. In the end, the reader is unaware of the stranger's intentions. He could be either the boy's saving grace or he could prove to be just as bad as most other characters they have met along the way. This final ambiguity makes it so every reader will have different opinions on what happens next, and the namelessness of the stranger helps to enhance this feeling of uncertainty.

The characters of *The Road* are not the only parts of the story who remain nameless throughout the novel. It can be noted that other aspects are shrouded from the reader as well. On several occasions, namelessness is linked to the darkness of night: "Wrapped in the blankets, watching the nameless dark come to enshroud them" (McCarthy, 8). At certain points, even the days themselves are referred to as nameless: "The windows giving back the gray and nameless day" (McCarthy, 128). In addition to the way the narrator describes the light and weather, the general locations the protagonists venture to are never revealed to the reader. The characters do, however, often seem to be aware of where they are and where they are headed:

“He had the names of towns and rivers by heart and he measured their progress daily” (McCarthy, 229). Clearly, the lack of names in the novel extends to other aspects as well and is not restricted to only the names of the characters. This way of writing invokes a sense of depravity and disorientation for the reader, and McCarthy even manages to manipulate the layout of the page itself in order to complement this.

4. Style, Structure and Empty Space

Something that many readers will inevitably notice when starting to read *The Road* is the way the novel is structured and formatted. There is a sense of scarcity and emptiness on the pages due to the way McCarthy splits and spaces his sections of text. While the novel does not have any chapters, it is still divided into sections or paragraphs of text that quite often subtly inform the reader that some time has passed since the last progress made by the two protagonists, be it a few hours, a day or even in some cases, several weeks. Some of these paragraphs are quite short, which creates a lot of emptiness on each page and one can argue that while the primary focus is to facilitate easier readability and to signal the passing of time, it also works to enhance the feeling of scarceness that the father and son are constantly followed by. McCarthy has said that he wrote the novel piece by piece, not having planned every section of the story from the beginning which makes sense regarding how the paragraphs of text are divided (McCarthy, “interview”, 00:02:54 – 00:03:09). This style of writing almost makes it seem like the novel is written as a diary in which the narrator writes down the progress of the father and son as they venture onwards.

The novel is also written in a very fluctuant degree of advanced and simple language as well as short and long sentences. When the characters talk to each other, they use concise, transparent language as if to save every ounce of energy they have. A normal conversation between the two protagonists can go like this:

I’m really hungry Papa.

I know.

Will we be able to find our stuff?

Yes. I know where it is.

What if somebody finds it?

They wont find it.
 I hope they dont.
 They wont. Come on.

(McCarthy, 85)

This type of short, straightforward dialogue echoes throughout the novel in almost every conversation. When the story instead focuses on the inner thoughts of the man, the sentences tend to be longer, nudging towards philosophical, existential ramblings at some points. A thing to note regarding the actual grammar and punctuation of the novel is that there is extensive lack of the use of apostrophes as well as quotation marks. On an initial reading it may seem like the reduced use of apostrophes is simply a mistake in punctuation, but it is very likely a deliberate part of McCarthy's writing for this particular story in order to minimize and strip the text for any excess components, mimicking the impoverished, sterile environments found in the novel. The way the content is told through short paragraphs, empty space, one-line sentences, as well as obscure, ambiguous descriptions, helps in heightening the feeling of void and solitude present in the novel.

5. Context, Society and Identity

The minimalistic "less is more" approach to writing which McCarthy makes use of in *The Road* can be seen found in many other novels which deals with names in a similar way, but there are other aspects that connect them further. Something that seems to echo in literature that excludes personal names is the setting as well as the state of society of the respective novel. In *Milkman* by Anna Burns, the story is set amidst The Troubles, a turbulent and violent time in Ireland's history. In *Blindness* by José Saramago, a horrible, blinding disease has created a horrific and disorganized society, and in McCarthy's *The Road* the world has been stricken by an unknown catastrophe that has annihilated most life on earth, or at least in America where the story takes place. It might seem that total namelessness is closely associated with a failing, anarchic setting and that as society collapses, so does everything that was once part of it. The locations the two protagonists venture to in the novel are often extremely bleak and filled with remnants that show how the world has changed. Most of the views and environments the novel describes are ash-filled, charred forests and decaying, abandoned homes. It could be argued that having

characters with personal names in such a barren, empty and dreadful setting could be detrimental to the story and assist in overcomplicating a horrible, yet very simple situation, namely to survive in this brutal setting. As McCarthy has said himself: “It’s a pretty simple, straightforward story” (McCarthy “interview, 00:06:25 – 00:06:30).

Names are inherently a crucial part of society itself. Every individual, at least to some degree, is defined by a name. Names can affect how others view the proprietor of the name, extending even into adulthood when one, for example, has to apply for a job, a visa or a bank loan. Names that can be considered exotic or colourful by some, can be considered foreign or even dangerous by others. Names are in some sense the last remnant we have of our own self as it is often the last thing that is forgotten about our existence. For most, one’s name is essential to one’s identity and is required for most of the things individuals want to partake in when living in a structured society. Having “the right” name is arguably becoming increasingly important in modern society. Someone with a family name associated with wealth and authority is likely be treated differently to someone from a working-class family. While it has been like this for hundreds of years, with the rising use digital platforms and social media, anyone has the possibility of becoming famous overnight. This in turn leads to more household family names and puts more pressure on having a name that both fits your character and, to a degree, has the chance to be marketable. Names are not only essential components for being part of a society, but also defines one’s identity and determines how we are treated by others as well as how we see ourselves. In *The Road*, society, as we know it, has already crumbled to dust and when society itself has collapsed, one can ask if there really are any reasons for names to continue to exist when all structure and purpose seems lost.

The boy is a central part of the story and is never more than a few feet away from his father who provides the reader with most of the observations and thoughts. As the boy was born amidst the apocalypse, the question of whether or not he has even received a name can be discussed, and due to the fact that his name is never even mentioned it might seem that he has not been given a name at all. Either this is true or he has, in fact, received a personal name of his own, it is just never mentioned to the reader. If one were to assume that the boy has his own personal name, why then would his father not use it? In a flashback in the novel, the reader is introduced to the mother of the boy who was alive before the main story takes place. It would make sense, realistically, that the three used each others’ names at this point in their lives when they all lived huddled together, but why then did they stop doing so when the mother left? With this limitation of knowledge one can imagine that the man has referred to his son by name at some point in the story, it is just that the reader was not present or informed when it happened.

An example of this can be found in the early parts of the novel when the man wakes up violently coughing and says the name of the boy's mother while almost stubbornly not relaying that exact information to the reader: "He coughed till he could taste the blood and he said her name aloud. He thought perhaps he'd said it in his sleep" (McCarthy, 56). The name of the mother is never revealed, but this scene shows that her name is known to the man and perhaps also to the boy. It is, however, never revealed to the reader. An argument could be made that since the novel only follows two characters, having them refer to each other by name might not be necessary, neither for the reader or for the characters themselves. Whenever they call out or speak they always know that the words are meant for each other. In that regard, referring to each other by name might not be considered a necessity by either one of them. As previously mentioned, by simply referring to the two protagonists as "the man" and "the boy", the characters can also function as blank slates for the reader, who might have an easier time sympathizing and understanding their situation, lessening the requirements to momentarily become part of their story.

In 2007, Cormac McCarthy stated, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, that that the novel was inspired by a trip to El Paso, Texas, where he brought along his young son and began imagining how the city would look many years from now (McCarthy "interview", 00:03:40 – 00:04:08). The relationship between the father and his son in the novel could, therefore, while very loosely, possibly be based on McCarthy's relationship with his own son. In some regard, it does not seem impossible that the two characters could have been McCarthy and his son themselves as imagined in a post-apocalyptic, survivalist setting. One might begin to wonder if the lack of personal names might connect with this in that naming the characters after themselves or someone completely different would slightly ruin the emotional connection McCarthy has with his own novel. The nameless characters of *The Road*, while functioning as blank slates, could be inspired by anyone, including the author himself and his son. The lack of names in the novel, whilst maybe making it harder to immediately connect and empathize with the protagonists, could help in making the story feel more personal in the long run.

6. Namelessness and Mystery as a Tool for Marketing

Cormac McCarthy can be considered quite a reclusive figure. It is apparent that he actively tries to avoid the spotlight and, with the exception of a few public appearances on talk-shows

like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, he seems to want to keep the focus on the works of literature themselves and not his own persona (Snyder, 28). As previously mentioned, McCarthy has made use of nameless characters in earlier works so he seems to be comfortable in a setting where the name of at least the main character remains unknown during the entirety of a story. His reclusive nature arguably bleeds into his writing in the form of the nameless characters he writes about, and with *The Road* he has completely embraced the technique. The mysteries and secrecy of *The Road* branch out past the nameless characters and flows into the setting itself. While it quickly becomes obvious that the story is set in America, the reader is never told exactly where the protagonists are at any given point or where they are ultimately headed. The only thing that is made clear is that they are traversing through mainly rural areas and that they are headed towards the sea. As discussed, the names of locations, towns and roads are never provided to the reader, which might seem quite strange in that the two protagonists carry with them a map at all times and that they recognize several road signs and points of interest along the way. This reluctance of sharing information with the reader helps in creating a sense of mystery and confusion which creates anticipation and hope to ultimately get at least some of the answers by the end, even though it might seem utterly implausible.

When the reader is not being provided with information that would be useful or even crucial to know, it can quickly lead to confusion and discouragement. In the case of *The Road* where both the descriptions and story are so simple and well-told, a total lack of personal names can instead enhance the narrative and provide intrigue and mystique. In connection with this, mystique and mystery can work as a form of marketing-tool, a salespoint to make the reader interested and invested in the story and its characters. A whole novel devoid of any personal names might sound like a daunting task to undertake but will inevitably create quite a lot of interest and publicity. While McCarthy might not have intended this outcome as he wrote the novel, the lack of names has very likely helped with creating anticipation and interest surrounding the publication and, on that note, also likely improved initial sales. Keeping something important about a character secret is a very common device in literature and films alike. The name of one or several characters being kept away from the audience has actually been a staple for a long time in film genres like the Western, Thrillers and Whodunnit mystery films. It is a device that creates anticipation and expectations in the mind of the consumer and can give them the task of solving a mystery by paying close attention to the details in the story. In literature, unnamed characters and particularly unnamed protagonists have for a long time been a common occurrence, maybe particularly so in poems and short stories. In works like *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) by Edgar Allan Poe, the narrator remains unnamed throughout the

text which in turn adds to the mystery and secrecy of the story. When reading a work of literature that creates mystery and suspense, readers tend to expect insight into the secrets present in the novel by continuing onwards but if nothing is resolved in due time it could lead to fatigue and even boredom. For this reason, authors have to carefully balance when and where to release new information to the reader. Curiosity and the pursuit of insight are two of the main driving forces behind a reader's need to discover new things, and having one or several nameless characters, or even not telling the reader where the story takes place can add to this feeling of anticipation while also making it feel as if the reader has a chance of making progress in unravelling the mystery by continuing to read. However, *The Road* never really provides the reader with a mystery to be solved. While there might be a bit of mystery surrounding the namelessness of the characters, it is not like having the names revealed would really change anything. The novel manages to create a sense of mystery not by creating an elaborate puzzle to deal with, but by presenting only the minimal amount of information needed for the reader to understand what is going at any point in time. *The Road* is of course not a mystery novel, and neither is it a thriller, but that does not dictate that it cannot use elements from the other genres. Almost all fiction takes inspiration from different genres and *The Road* is no different.

Obscurity and sparse information is frequent in *The Road*, and while it could easily feel confusing and hopeless in other works of literature, McCarthy's tale of a father and his son is presented in such an impeccably simple way that most readers arguably never get to a state of fatigue. Names are simply not needed in *The Road*, and with that thought... namelessness might even be a crucial part of this specific story. Without names for the readers to grasp on to, they must create their own expectations and notion of who the characters are. The characters the two protagonists meet in the story are, like themselves, blank slates that are not defined by anything other than their appearance and their actions. During an encounter, "the old man" is simply that. An old man. Everything the reader learns about the character going forwards is only based on two things – the character's own actions as well as the perception the two protagonists have on him.

7. The "Word of God"

As many critics have pointed out, *The Road* is inherently a religious story. The boy is seen as a kind of miracle by the father, and at one point the father even refers to him as "the word of

God” (McCarthy, 3). The boy is epitomized with an almost Christ-like presence in the novel, at least in the eyes of his father, but this sentiment seems to be acknowledged by other characters they meet as well. The old man they meet who lies to them about his name being Ely is one of those characters. The old man admits that he thought he had died when he saw the young boy and when asked by the father if he thought the boy was an angel, the old man replies saying: “I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen” (McCarthy, 183). The man then replies asking: “What if I said that he’s a god?”, to which the old man shakes his head and says: “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” (McCarthy, 183). While the old man has doubts about the boy being connected to God, he cannot seem to deny that there is something unexplainably holy or pure about the boy. A similar experience occurs at the very end of the novel with the woman accompanying the ambiguous stranger on the road. She seems overjoyed to meet the boy and gives him a warm, welcoming hug. She also mentions “that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (McCarthy, 306). It seems that almost every character they meet along the way sees the boy as someone very closely tied with Christianity, and in some cases he is spoken to almost as if he was the last remaining remnant of God himself. One of the first descriptions provided by the novel of the boy gives insight in how his father views him and briefly lets the reader know of the “mission” the father believes he is part of. The man seems to be convinced that he has been tasked by God himself to prepare the boy in every way he can before he passes away from his sickness. He points out that even while feeling lost he “knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (McCarthy, 3). He seems to believe that his purpose is to protect the boy in every way he can, but as he dies toward the end of the story, he cannot do more than to hope that he has managed to fulfil that destiny.

The name Ely is the only personal name that is ever mentioned in the novel and while it is quickly proven to be a false name, it still creates associations with the reader. The name has strong ties to the Hebrew Bible as well as to Samaritan tradition. According to the Books of Samuel in the Old Testament, a man named Eli was a High Priest in the now ancient city of Shiloh. The priest took responsibility for raising and training the biblical figure Samuel but failed in this task and was subsequently punished by the deity Yahweh resulting in his eventual death. With Ely being the only name revealed in the novel, one can assume that the old man might have a similar history to the biblical figure, or at least that he feels regret for

failing as a father or mentor. This is, however, pure speculation based on the research of the associations we have with names stated in the previous sections of this essay and is otherwise hard to argue for.

The way the two characters are referenced in the novel also has ties with Christianity in that of the Holy Trinity: The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit. “The father” and “the son” are quite obvious links between *The Road* and The Holy Trinity, and “The Holy Spirit” could imply that, while not a character in the novel himself, God is somehow part of their quest. While the safekeeping of the boy is the man’s main priority he also struggles with his connection to God, often changing between a state of pleading to God and condemning him for not providing guidance. Originally, the novel was apparently going to place a heavier focus on religion and to that extent was also written with the working title “The Grail” instead of “The Road” (Josephs, 134). Regarding the change of title, Allen Josephs says that: “The fact that [Cormac McCarthy] cut it does not mean he changed his mind. It is a Hemingwayesque burying of the all too obvious – the famous iceberg technique – to strengthen the power of the passage” (Josephs, 139). While the title was changed to lessen the obvious religious connotations, the content probably stayed similar to the final product with only a few adjustments. While the full extent of what was changed or altered early on in the drafts of *The Road* is not certain, the idea of the boy as a Christ-like figure, how the name Ely ties in with the Hebrew Bible, and the connotations between the man and the boy with The Holy Trinity yet remain in the novel.

8. Conclusion

The absence of names in *The Road* can quickly be recognized as a stylistic choice made by Cormac McCarthy as he began writing the novel, but as this paper indicates, the nameless characters and locations can function as a narrative tool in many different ways. By not letting the reader in on any names, the novel manages to create a sense of loneliness, disorientation and desperation that extends the state of mind of the two protagonists and unto the reader. The secrecy and anonymity of the novel create an invitation for readers to look more closely at what they are reading, enticing them to scavenge the text themselves in order to find answers. By utilizing a minimalistic approach both to the writing and the format of the text, McCarthy manages to remove a lot of both internal and external distractions resulting in a very simple

novel that deals with some extremely bleak subjects. This minimalistic approach extends to the lack of names as well which arguably helped the novel in terms of marketing. Similar to films, novels that make use of a “gimmick” tends to do better in sales, and while this might not have been intentional by McCarthy at the time of writing, it might have helped to enhance the publicity of the novel.

When looking at other works of literature that does not reveal names, a pattern starts to emerge. In *Blindness* by José Saramago and in *Milkman* by Anna Burns, society is in a state of turbulence, and while the society present in *The Road* could be said to be no society at all, the three novels seem to share a unified view on names relating to society. They all seem to agree that as names are a fundamental part of society, they too naturally disappear as society breaks down. The simplest answer, however, is that the America depicted in *The Road* seems, in a way, to no longer require personal names due to the nature of the desolate, crumbling world the characters inhabit. Ely, the old man who lies about his name, does so due to his fear that his real name might be corrupted or misused in some way. His name, along with his memories, are the only parts of his life that are left of his legacy, a legacy he seemingly wants to forget. By not giving anyone his true name, he can die in peace believing that he is truly forgotten and that he is free from his previous actions.

Understanding how namelessness functions in novels like *The Road* can provide new ways to view the intrinsic power that names have and assist in uncovering what happens when otherwise “essential” parts of a story are removed. The way of studying names in literature by analyzing texts that make do without them can seem counterproductive at first but can be very advantageous. To fully understand the importance of names in literature, one might have to begin to think about a world that actively excludes them, and *The Road* does exactly this. The gap of knowledge and identity left by the absence of names in the novel, while missed and longed for upon initial reading, can become a source of appreciation for McCarthy’s talents on further study. Due to McCarthy’s reclusive nature regarding interviews and public appearances, it seems unlikely that he will ever give his own ideas on the subject of literary namelessness, but this might just be for the best. While many of the functions mentioned and discussed in this thesis might never have been deliberately planned by McCarthy himself, they can still be part of a larger, more complex answer than anything that can be shown in such a short thesis.

While it can feel quite strange to read an entire novel without the names of either characters or locations, as humans we have an innate way to cope with this loss and create sense and meaning from anything we can project our ideas and thoughts on to. The absence of

names in literature seems to work in the same way as when anything else has disappeared. One tries to find what is missing by tracing it back to a known point, and in the case of *The Road*, before the cataclysmic event even happened. By assuming that the pre-apocalyptic world of *The Road* was at one point similar to our own, it becomes possible, through researching what it means to have a name, to understand why there is no place for names in this ashen, barren landscape. In order to understand and grasp the concept and meaning of namelessness, it becomes vital to study the missing element. The nature and meaning of names themselves.

Word count: 8151

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