

An Analysis of *The Road* from the Perspective of Community Theory*

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As one of the representatives of Anthropocene fiction, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* focuses on the protagonists' looking for hope for living. It can be inferred when analyzed with Tönnies' theory that a community is constructed within the relationship between father and son, together with other characters that are involved in the narration. Accordingly, the changing process of community is demonstrated in a progressive sequence of blood-geopolitics-spirit, revealing a sense of progression in an Anthropocene context. This paper analyzes and explores the process of evolution in three dimensions reflected in the novel: construction, crisis, and the reconstruction of community. It is considered that *The Road* conveys powerful calls of the yearn for the survival of the individual, which can be regarded as a reflection of the human condition in reality. Meanwhile, its distinct and full-scale evolution of community process expressed in the novel also presents a referentiality to the age of Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, Tönnies community

The Road is a post-apocalyptic novel written by contemporary American novelist Cormac McCarthy (1933-2023), telling a story of a father and son making every endeavour to find the hope of living in a post-cataclysmic world. Published in 2006, this novel becomes popular for its vivid imagination about the post-disaster world and its reflection of reality, in which the human condition is endowed with significant meaning. McCarthy puts emphasis on the representation of extremely harsh living environments for the characters which serves as the background to manifest human nature, instinct and moral choices. Previously, *The Road* is considered to a type of science fiction narrative with the representation of environment-related issues. Normally, such kind of fictions tend to depict "a series of unexplained doomsday events, the ensuing collapse of civilization, and the destruction of the natural world" (Ye & Han, 2021, p. 97). McCarthy practices this motif in *The Road*. He tries to tell "a pretty simple story" (Lincoln, 2009, p. 193) with a setting of "a lot of apocalyptic

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doomsday scenes” (Dong, 2011, p. 70), emphasizing “a sense of mysterious fear and an endless sadness” (Fang, 2012, p. 70). Meanwhile, the father and son have to “face all sorts of ethical dilemmas and options” (Feng & Liu, 2014, p. 545). They were struggling to survive through the hardships, with their emotional resonance and spiritual connections enhancing. Meanwhile, the construction of community also boosts in the process of alleviating survival difficulties and weakening conflicts.

Community is a term discussed and analyzed by Ferdinand Tönnies. As one of the founders of German sociology, he introduced the concept of *Gemeinschaft* (often translated as “community”) in his work *Community and Society* (1887). It refers to a type of social organization characterized by strong interpersonal bonds, shared values, and a sense of belonging. Tönnies considers that the types of the community are primarily realized in the group established on the basis of nature, such as family and the gens. Besides, it is also possible for the community to come true in the small complex, such as the rural, the urban which formed historically, and even the combination of thought. In *The Road*, the father-son relationship exists in family relationship which is established on the basis of nature, while the collaboration between the son and the other family mentioned in the end consists the complex of thinking. Tönnies has his own explanation on these relationships in his book. He first divides the life of human into two major forms, the “community” and the “society”. Based on these, community is further compartmentalized into three types: the blood community, the geo-community and spiritual community. According to this theory, the father-son community in the novel is first a blood community, and the son and the family transcend blood and geographical relations to become a spiritual community. However, this does not mean that the father-son community is isolated and unchanging. Because instead of being an independent existence, the three types of communities exist in different proportions during different stages that emerge diverse ethical idiosyncrasy (Zhang & Wang, 2023, p. 37). They “are intimately connected with each other in respect of both place and time, both in particular phenomena and in the whole of human culture and its history” (Tönnies, 2001, pp. 27-28). This can be profoundly reflected in the changes and deepening of the father-son community in different periods of the book in different main forms of blood, geography and spirit, worth making a thorough inquiry deeply.

Construction: The Natural Form of the Blood Community

The blood community is composed of the family bonding with blood and taking care of each other is the most natural community. Everyone in this community has a sense of a natural and intuitive understanding, which is called the “default consistency” in Tönnies theory (cf. Zhang & Wang, 2023, p. 37). As Tönnies said, “Unity of human wills and the possibility of community is in fact based first and foremost on close blood relationship and mixture of blood” (Tönnies, 2001, p. 34). Of the three pillars of community: blood, land and spirit (or kinship, neighbourhood and friendship), blood is the essence of what constitutes a family (Tönnies, 2001, p. 204). The father’s desire to survive in the doomsday comes from his family, his son. Without his son, he would lose hope of living, and the community would collapse. Kin is the concrete expressive form of the blood community whose individuals are connected by the certain relationship of kin. It could fall into the parent-child relationship, conjugal relationship and authority relationship in broad terms. Among them, “fatherhood is the clearest foundation for the concept of authority within the community” (Tönnies, 2001, p. 25). Instead of benefiting those who hold authority, fatherhood educates children by imparting life lessons, developing a healthy family

relationship with his children (Tönnies, 2001, p. 25). In *The Road*, all the values and thoughts that the son has learned come from his father mostly. Even in the most difficult times, his father always tells him not to forget the wonderful world that once was, which becomes son's confidence and courage of continuing living.

It can be inferred from some dialogues of this novel that the initial blood community is comprised of the father, the mother and the son, which is brimming with intense contradictions. Father has been holding out hope for survival. On the contrary, mother is always indifferent and apathetic to life. For instance, father says to mother: "We are survivors" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 55). It can be told from his expression that this is the sigh with emotion and the anticipation for life. While mother doesn't share the same feeling, or agree with father's words. She can't stand suffering like this in a post-apocalyptic world, and think that "we are the walking dead in the horror film" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 55). In spite of the father's request for not leaving them and continuing to survive in the apocalypse, she chooses to commit suicide. The blood community consisting of the family of the three was temporarily deconstructed here. After that, son can't come to terms with the death of his mother, and says "I wish I was with my mom" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 55). His father also misses her, and says her name aloud at night. Father and son's thoughts for mother just show that the community on the basis of the family blood relationship among them remains dominant in the early stage. Nor are they getting accustomed to the community structure which takes the two people as main part. Nonetheless, the urgency of survival and hiding dangers constrain them to cheer up and the emergence of the rudiment of the community also facilitates in the whirligig of time. In case like this, without the presence of mother, father and son are united by their blood and familial bond initially. They gradually accept the community pattern composed of them, proceeding with their journey of survival. In this way, the father defaults on his responsibility to take care of his son, and the son defaults on following his father. Upon this, the complete father-son community is naturally established and dominates within a certain period of time.

Crisis: The Conflict and Contradiction of Geographical Community

A geo-community is composed of various family communities living together. It is directly manifested by the members' close proximity of residences in physical environment. As members within the community share the same piece of land and their long-term co-habitation, they develop similar or identical habits and conventions. "In the child, or in the adult, the roots of a coherent, logical sense of the outer world are sunk deeply in the soil of close, meaningful interpersonal relations" (Nisbet, 2010, p. 171). The blood community is firstly constructed in this novel. However, it is no longer realistic for father and son to possess a land for settlement in a post-apocalyptic world. Without fixed shelters and lands, they have developed the same daily routine and lifestyle habits of looking for food and shelters and avoiding dangers for survival.

When analyzing the geographical community from a deeper perspective, the dual-crisis from both internal and external factors could be seen under the mutual motivation of the community. The internal crisis refers to the thinking and behavior difference resulting from the diversity of the perception, identity and assignment between father and son. This specifically manifests the conflict of speech and acts in the novel, further reflecting the trouble reconciling of internal conflict. For instance, The father intends to go to the spot where he previously left the shopping cart on his own and said "I want you to wait here.....I won't be far away. I'll be able to hear you if you call" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 70). But son indicates his reluctance to let his father go. However, the father doesn't pay attention to his son's request. He replies:

“Stop it. I want you to do what I say. Take the gun.”

“I don’t want the gun.”

“I didn’t ask you if you wanted it. Take it.” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 70)

It is not difficult to see the concept of the problem of “whether to leave” is contradictory between them. In such a geographical community where members are living and working together, father didn’t observe the feeling of not willing to being alone in son’s heart, insisting on starting off by himself. While the son doesn’t understand why his father decided to leave him behind and even leave him the gun. In this process, the inherent conflict comes into being due to the significant difference in experiences and the unchanging identity relationship between the two. As a leader and protector, father carries the responsibility of protecting the lives of his son and himself while his son would rather not risk life due to potential dangers.

The external crisis refers to the extrinsic artificial threat surrounding them besides the natural disasters. Father often takes different approaches to protect his son according to different situations. For example, when they are discovered by a single bad guy, instead of acting rashly, father chooses to deal with him in order to find an opportunity to escape. However, when they accidentally enter the cannibal’s residence, the father quickly flees with his son and gives him a gun so that he could commit suicide at the critical moment to prevent falling into a worse situation.

Unlike the internal contradiction, the external contradiction is unable to being exterminated wholly and runs through the novel like shadows indispensable in any stages. As a result, father and son can only accept or flee passively but can’t avoid the external crisis. They bring potential or direct conjuncture to the geographical community. However, the external reshaping of the spiritual community is the polar opposite of the geographical community later.

Reconstruction: The Unity of Objective of the Spiritual Community

The community of spirit, the binding link on the level of conscious thought, works together for the same end and purpose. The friendship or comradeship are as perfectly intelligible ways of describing those three original types. The divinity thus evoked and worshipped by a common spirit is of major importance for maintaining the bond, since it alone or for the most part is what gives the bond a living, lasting form (Tönnies, 2001, pp. 27-28). Along with the enhancement of decision volition of human, their essential volition wears off. The closeness of blood community and the sense of belonging of geographical community also decrease. On the way of fleeing, they have common survival goals, encouraging with each other and becoming the spiritual strut and emotional support. On the basis of blood and geography, their common spirits and wills achieve the high degree of unity, creating conditions to the final appearance of the spiritual community.

The spiritual community also faces internal and external reconstruction. The reconstruction inside represents the spiritual unity after the searing agony. At first, father and son have the problem of “self-regard and saving” at variance. They meet a person who has been struck by lightning. Son asks “Can’t we help him, papa” and keep pulling at his coat, but father answers resolutely and decisively: “No, we can’t help him” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 50). The father is well aware of the existence difficulty of the end crisis, just wanting to guarantee the safety of him and his son, not willing to take care of other people. However, son keeps kind and willing to help more people. Having experiencing all kinds of crisis and anneal, the son understands his father’s efforts gradually

when the father does not want to neglect his son's quality of goodness. After that, when they meet the old men requiring help again, father helps son's kind actions. In the sequel, father's injury facilitates their relationships coalescing into the power of spirit. Subsequently, they depend on each other during the father's last days which brought them into contact with each other. As a result, the geographical community is internally reconstructed, with the mutual impact and unity of their spirit exceeding their blood and geographical relationships. The latter based on the spiritual community sets up and develops between them.

The exterior reconstruction means that son makes choice with the encountering strangers on account of the same survival goals and consistent spiritual faith. Quite different from the blood community and the geographical community, the spiritual community is able to overstepping the bonds of blood and clan based on the distant or close relationships, and exists independently in the people who share a unity of chases and spirits, helping them connect with each other. After the father passes away, the son comes across the other family. The man of this family think that "you should come with me". The son asks him "are you one of the good guys", and the man says "Yeah" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 282). The son remains hopeful about being alive, and the man expresses they would accept him. The son reaches a spiritual consistence with the family after a short time of being together, not only because of their hope for living, but also their denial of eating people for survival. Consequently, the son chooses to join them and keep on searching for chances of survival. Without the blood and geographical relationships, they found a new community on a essential basis. Arriving here, the old geographical relationships are collapsed and reshaped, and the new spiritual community is born from the ground.

Conclusion

Every outstanding litterateur and critic has "community impulses", an energetic, cohesive impulse that are organically generated form of community exceeding the blood and geography (Yin, 2016, p. 78). This is mainly manifested in the form of a spiritual community. The substance of spiritual community lies in "hope for life", whose composition and combination gather the people sharing consistent goals, beliefs and spirits together and forms an inseparable whole. In McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, father and son survived with a bumpy ride, and then the son was willing to join other survivors' family who both had the morality of civilized society and the hope of survival. From start to finish, the interpersonal relationships are linked closely and profoundly by the community. It will be a spiritual sustainment even if it's not in the backdrop of doomsday. The process of father-son community developing and tempering the will in the crisis, becomes the microcosm of the development of human society community. It also helps people comprehend and explore the changing rules and profound meanings of the community. While reflecting the human condition, *The Road* provides new ideas and new possibilities for the development of human communities in the Anthropocene, calling for people's hope and pursuit of life even in difficult and dangerous situations.

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