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Okay: The Road and the Good Guys' Adulthood Code

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Introduction

The success of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the immediate interest in the subsequent screenplay and film adaptation add intuitive support to the idea that fictional narratives attract audiences foremost due to their capacity to offer a mental space for reflection about the conditions of our social world. Pondering what the world would look like when his son was his age, McCarthy did not just write a novel about a man and his son's journey on foot through a devastated world, but "a meditation on morality, what makes human life meaningful" (Wielenberg 1). In a world where people literally feed on each other after an unspecified catastrophe, the father's quest is to "preserve human goodness by turning his son into a messianic moral compass" before he dies (Cooper 135). However, the man is aware that he has little time to teach the boy what he needs to know to grow into adulthood and survive. Nor is the man himself prepared for this mission. So, in order to fulfill his role as mentor, he has to explore and reevaluate the ideals of the adult world that he once knew and go through a journey of maturation of his own.

Continually, in all three versions, the man and boy communicate in order to bond, stay alive, learn, and grow, while the plot's rhetorical act structure furthers a thematic line of argument about adulthood. Specifically, "the oft-repeated phrase 'okay' functions as a primal response, useful in many ways as agreement, understanding with or without agreement, reassurance, and end of discussion" (Woodson 94). More importantly, these speech acts draw attention to the relevance of specific lessons, both for the two fictional characters and for the audiences. Thus, Paul D. Knox suggests that "the use of *okay* reveals that surviving the wasteland requires more than finding food and shelter; surviving the wasteland requires re-creating the communities that the apocalypse has erased" (97).

However, the lessons about what it is to be adult are disguised by *The Road's* deceptively dichotomous structure, and Naomi Morgenstern is not alone in

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observing that the “*The Road* is characterized by what one could only call a primitive and insistent opposition between the good and the bad” (75). Yet, under its bleak and polarizing surface, a voyage through *The Road*’s landscapes in the novel, screenplay, and film may serve as a didactic vessel for lessons about adult and nonadult behavior.

The man in *The Road* once had a family, a home, work, and thus probably no urgent reasons to reflect on his own status as an adult. After the catastrophe, he must re-evaluate his position, as he begins a journey not just across fields and forests but towards a new maturity. For him “the boy was all that stood between him and death” (McCarthy 29), and it is his selfish innocence and fear of dying that drive him to take his son with him on the road. Eventually, he is transformed into an eternal mentor whose thoughts literally reverberate through his narration of the text. As Cooper observes, the father’s gradual awakening and his process of transformation makes him the hero of the quest to become a man adult enough to father both his son and humanity (136–38). Thus, Cynthia Miller maintains, *The Road* “works on several levels to examine human relationships and responsibilities” (47), and so it becomes a story about “what is best in humans” (Woodson 95) and what we should live up to as adults.

In this context, the novel’s basic “Code of the Good Guys” declares that they don’t eat people but rather help others, they don’t steal or lie, they keep their promises, and they never give up (Wielenberg 4). To this can be added the words that McCarthy himself has used to express the message he wanted to convey with *The Road*: concern, care, and appreciation (Oprah). Notably, the traits mentioned here correspond to classic adult markers as they are described by scholars in various models.¹ Moreover, they echo the aim of the hero’s journey, “adult realization,” as it is outlined by Joseph Campbell (16).

¹ See for instance Lewis R. Aiken’s *Human Development in Adulthood*, Harry Blatterer’s *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*, and Erik H Erikson *Identity and the Life Cycle*.

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Intuitively, adulthood may be defined as reaching a certain age and formal independence from one's parents, by means of moving out, having a job, and forming a family. Yet being adult is also associated with personal growth and mature approaches to life's challenges (Roberts and Takahashi 4; Blatterer, *Semantic* 66). For instance, in developmental psychology, a certain degree of stability emerges as a key marker of adulthood, which relates to a series of other qualities, such as sociability, adaptability, conformity to norms, empathy, and intimacy. Other aspects that define the idea of adulthood are emotional balance, a constructive self-awareness, a recognition of complexities, a stable world view, competence, autonomy of mind, rationality, goal orientation, and a sense of responsibility. This list of qualities indicates that the road to adulthood is a demanding and "nonlinear process with no clear indication of completion," as Varda Konstam declares (7). Hence, Campbell suggests that the developmental cycle, from innocence and egocentricity to full capacity as an adult, must be repeated over and over again in a heroic, life-long quest (30; 212).

In this article, I explore the particularities of the lessons about adulthood that the word "okay"² draws attention to in the novel and in the cinematic adaptation (i.e., the screenplay and film). The rhetorical distribution of the word throughout the four acts of the plot emphasizes a thematic progression, from presupposed understandings of adulthood to a more developed thematic notion. *The Road* thus underscores that adulthood is a state of uncertainty, not of stability, that demands constant risk assessments and reliance on others. Interestingly, the novel, screenplay, and film foreground different markers of adulthood, so that they form

² Like the origins of the man and the story's catalyzing event, the etymology of the word "okay" is clouded, with possible origins in Choctaw, Scotland, and West Africa.

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complementing versions of a “Good Guys’ Adulthood Code,” with a common call for self-awareness, complex responsibility, and a balanced sense of autonomy, trust, care, and control, to keep invalid principles, pride, and false self-sufficiency in check.

The thematic attributes of the man and the boy in the story are orchestrated and articulated for specific rhetorical effects across the plot line, by means of the poetics of each medium (cf., Eder; Phelan). Thus, the rhetorical meaning of an attribute depends on just where in the plotted act structure it appears. As the plot progresses, what Hogan calls “abnormalities” constitute narrative interruptions that highlight various thematic markers. In *The Road*, the recurring syntactic interruptions by the word “okay,” either as a question or as a statement, in various emotional frames of mind, form such interruptions. Despite their subtlety, they draw attention to the initiation or conclusion of thematic instances, and they emphasize what is said, done, enacted, or experienced by the characters. Moreover, the speech acts that are performed through the utterance of the word “okay” vary, both with regard to the intended locutionary function and the perlocutionary effect. Moreover, the expressions of character and specific markers of adulthood that the word “okay” draw attention to are conditioned by the distinct expressive means and media conventions that circumscribe the novel, screenplay, and film. Whereas the film works with multiple elements of sound—words, effects, and music—and simultaneous visual impressions, the novel and the screenplay are limited to the sensations that words can produce. However, single sentences in the novel often describe “not a single action but repeated actions” (Pryor 27) and shape the reader’s impressions of sound, scents, and tactile sensations (28).

All the same, in the process of adaptation, the short novel’s 58,772 words had to be condensed, to slightly less than half that number, 24,788 words in the screenplay, before these were expanded to 111 minutes of film. To some extent, the word counts may give an indication of how the functions of specific words have been emphasized in an adaptation. For instance, “papa” occurs 67 times in the

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screenplay and almost twice as many in the screenplay, at 136. Similarly, “maybe” occurs 16 times in the screenplay and 36 in the novel. However, the word “okay” appears 195 times in the novel and only 37 in the screenplay, which in quantitative terms suggests that the function of the term has been subjected to a qualitative thematic transformation.

The Novel

The novel, praised for its style of narration, “the minimalist aesthetic driving the language—in description, interior reflection, and dialogue” (Frye 166), makes use of an omniscient narrator’s observations to guide the reader. This voice is closely linked to the father character through its linguistic expressions, and the “revelations of the protagonist’s interior world are tightly interwoven with the narrator’s, to the extent that the two viewpoints merge and are frequently indistinguishable” (Cooper 137). The language mirrors the state of apocalyptic desperation and “engenders a sense of denial—stylistic and narrative—of life” (Mavri 5), through a lack of proper nouns and juxtaposed “grammatically disjointed phrases” (De Bruyn 778) in the slow, rhythmic staccatos of a body, sometimes out of breath, sometimes with the “contractions and expansions” (Pryor 37) of prayer. It is in this poetic context that the word “okay” forms an even pulse in the novel, with one or two occurrences on almost every page, and with several instances of intense interruptions of five repetitions in a sequence, but sometimes with no occurrences for up to thirteen pages, to mark the narrator’s rhythm.

Setup: Innocent Care and Invalid Principles

In the novel, the initial notion of adulthood is defined by a focus on care, intimacy, responsibility, and unity. The first “okay” introduces the current state of normalcy, when the father asks if his son has the strength and is ready to move on, after which the narrator depicts how they are “shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire” (4). Although the father’s question communicates his intimate

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worry and protective care as an adult, the “okay” passes unnoticed because the rhetorical pattern has not yet been established. However, a few pages later, seven repetitions occur in rapid succession, just after the man’s and the boy’s goal of reaching the ocean has been articulated, which draws attention to the rhetorical figure. The use of “okay” in this dialogue stresses the mutual need for intimacy and concord, for their world not to crumble and their bond of loyalty to remain unharmed. Accordingly, the boy repeatedly confirms the man’s caring statements and questions, a pattern which thus gradually contributes to the boy’s increased self-reliance. At this instance, the boy is prompted to authorize the man to blow out the lamp, saying “Yes. That’s okay” (9). This closes an accentuated and structured repetition to prepare the reader’s attention for the boy’s question, in the dark, what the father would do if the boy died. The subsequent bonding dialogue concludes with a verbal reassurance, in a similar reiteration of another phrase closed by an “okay,” which makes it possible for them to fall asleep for the time being: “I would want to die too. / So you could be with me. / Yes. So I could be with you. / Okay” (9).

However, the man struggles with a precarious lack of belonging, the relevance of memories, and the dangers of nostalgia. These struggles are demonstrated when the father’s inner dreams rise to the surface at his abandoned childhood home. The son’s sensation of danger is discarded by the man’s rhythmic, but repetitive “it’ll be okay” (25) and “it’s okay” (28). In connection with these scenes, McCarthy employs earthquakes metaphorically: the ground shakes and trees are torn from their roots. Meanwhile, the boy’s worrying nightmares re-initiate the father’s caring assurances that “it’s okay” (36; 37), and, reflecting his own mindset, the man concludes that “dreams can be really scary” (37). All the same, he stimulates more positive mental visions as he tells the boy that it’s “okay” to go into a pond with deep water and teaches the boy how to float (39), a metaphor for their state of affairs. This also reflects the necessity of coping with the complexities of the world, especially the man’s task of fathering his son. Although he is not yet ready to float himself in that

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capacity, he tells the boy “stories of courage and justice” (42) and instinctively displays inner strength and rationality to protect them both from the present physical dangers. Yet his dominant reactive short-term perspective also reveals his disorientation regarding the long-term challenge of preparing the boy for the future. In part, he reluctantly postpones the more complex responsibilities, narrowing his focus to their physical well-being and drawing metaphorical inference from the roads as he states that “there is nothing to uproot them, so they should be okay for a while” (44). Nevertheless, the series of “okays” gradually initiate the boy to the art of assessing signs of danger and paths to safer shores.

The father also demonstrates the need to prioritize when he offers no help to a dying man. To the boy, the incident is a dramatic lesson about the complexities of the world. Still, the awakening is stronger for the father, since the boy’s refusal to talk to him afterward exposes the instability of the connection that they depend upon. Before they reconnect through an exchange of “okays,” which acknowledges their bond (53), the man understands that their attachment and cooperation cannot be taken for granted unless they share core values and aims.

Perhaps the most demanding moral of Campbell’s account of the hero’s journey is the importance of trust in others and a modest ego. Just as the man tutors the boy to the best of his capacities, the boy now takes on the role of the father’s mentor in a collaborative and adaptive exchange. When the man apologizes for coughing, the boy returns his care with a comforting “it’s okay” (56). The phrase here functions as a first catalyst for events that make it clear that the man has yet to learn how to be fully alive and to have faith in what the boy has to teach him.

The crossing of this first dramatic threshold is completed when the man shoots one of the bad guys to protect them both and they find that they need to completely reevaluate the balance of their priorities and values. The state of absolute uncertainty that this entails becomes clear as the man calms the boy after the shooting, trying just as much to comfort himself with the repetitive “it’s okay” (69), knowing that the journey of development has only begun.

Complication: The Burden of Complex Responsibilities

The second act of the narrative, the purpose of which is to reveal the intricacies of the thematic concept, begins with a re-establishment of the unity between the man and boy, through their mutual values and the man's responsibilities. However, the father has yet to explore and develop the facets of his own adult character.

Frustrated, he commands his son to talk to him, and the boy's affirming "okay" allows the man to declare to them both that, after all, he has been appointed by God "to take care of" the son (80), even if it means killing another person. This moral conflict incites them to affirm to each other that they are "still the good guys" and "will always be" so (81). However, the excessive repetition of this message signals doubt, as well as a worry that they might transgress the line of decency before too long. The only ease that they find lies in the "okays" that seal the oath to remain good, mindful of the depth of complexities that any code of ethics and values might present.

In the novel, the ensuing trials are framed by encouraging confirmations that they are going to be okay, as they re-evaluate and sort out strengths and weaknesses, possibilities and threats, on the road to the father's elevated state of adulthood. A first step for the man is to assume a more instrumental parental role, teaching the boy to make strategic and cautious evaluations; all the while, their conversations are completed with approving "okays." These affirming rituals manifest the adult authority and capacity to lead through competence, care and hope. Although many lessons, like finding water before food, are practical, the man now begins to demonstrate the value of trust, adaptation, cooperation, prioritization, and sound, informed judgements.

The contradictions that the world offers them, as the man's and boy's ideals must be balanced with their harsh realities, are brought to the fore when the boy says that he believes the father is lying about their chances of survival. "Okay, I might. But we're not dying," the man replies (105). "Okay," the boy repeats,

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acknowledging the priority of hope before demoralizing honesty. However, through this agreement they also subscribe to a higher level of risk-taking for the greater purpose. With increasing intensity, the man tells the boy that “it’s okay,” not because a situation is safe, but because they “have no choice” but to confront it (112). Thus, the simple evaluation of urgent problems is replaced with a more complex assessment of probabilities. The function of the first act’s often intimate and comforting “okays” has now been exchanged for more formal confirmations that their strategic and rational judgements accord with their goals and values.

A tentative understanding of what might be gained in the future, also regarding the thematic lesson, is usually reached at the midpoint of the conventional heroic journey. At first glance, the prospects are far from the brightest in *The Road*. Still reluctant to change and to assume the ultimate responsibility, the man shows a poor sense of judgment, stability, and care when he commands the boy to learn to commit suicide, in order to avoid a possible worse fate in the future. Observing his own mistake, the man resigns and returns to the comforting “it’s okay” (119) as a reminder that he must still be the responsible one. In this scene, the phrase serves as a turning point for the man’s self-awareness. For the first time, he must truly consider whether he could kill his own son as an act of care, an intensified parallel to the end of the first act of the drama. He acknowledges that it is okay to be found wanting at times, if that is compensated by other qualities.

Attention is next drawn to an alternative, brighter vision of their prospects by a succession of confirming and reassuring “okays” as the man decides to examine a house and a bunker. The father regains his stability and authority through their moral code: “Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up,” which the boy seals with “okay” (145). In the shelter, full of canned food and other necessities, frequent “okays” mark a temporary return to the initial intimacy and care, a pause in their existence during which the man can teach the son about the good and simple things he knows. Summarizing the lesson thus far, the man concludes that “it’s okay” to be selfish when no harm is done to others, because people

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generally want what is best for the greater good (148). As a result of this temporary harmony, every “okay” in this sequence emphasizes the temptation to abandon the quest and to be content with the situation and awareness of adulthood that they have achieved.

Development: Self-Awareness, Reason, and Goal-Oriented Faith

Just as efficiently as McCarthy lets the word “okay” initiate, dramatize, and conclude thematic key instances in *The Road*, he also uses its absence for several pages to mark what could be called dramatic act transitions. At the midpoint of the narrative, when developments conventionally balance on an edge, twelve pages pass before an “okay” signals a re-commitment to caution and hope and introduces the next act’s theme: the man’s pride. “Let’s not get too smart,” he says (170). “Okay,” the boy agrees, and takes on the role as the father’s mentor in the following pursuit of this ambition, as he asks what their “long term goals” are (170), thus introducing a new perspective of reason, responsibility, hope, and complexity.

As they continue, the man’s increasing self-awareness, along with his struggles to learn to adapt, trust, and to understand how cooperation truly works, allows the boy’s autonomy to grow. In this phase of the novel, almost every “okay” is active in this process, which offers them far from a linear line of progression. An encounter with an old vagrant brings forth the value of negotiation in the context of social adaptation, cooperation, and respect. Offering a cooked meal and a stop for the night is “the best deal you’re going to get. / Okay,” the man declares to the boy (175). Now conscious of the various, complicating functions of the word “okay,” from the submissive response when a command is obeyed to a cautious statement that all is well, the man states firmly that “okay means okay” and that there will be no further negotiations (175), which is sealed by a double repetition of the word. While this negotiation nevertheless results in a mutual commitment to care for others (Knox 97), other values are still ambiguous. Yet their conversation illustrates how much any social existence needs to rely on unity and mutual comprehension of matters in a

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world of no fixed rules or truths. The other man forces the father to define his faith in God and mankind and he puts forward that the boy is “a God” (183). The boy’s apotheosis, the father’s first concession to an imperative change in their statuses, also opens up for a new sense of humility. When they break camp, it is the boy’s turn to reproach the father for mocking the old man. “Okay,” the father says submissively, and the acknowledging word leads him to face his greatest fears in a prayer. “I am going to die,” he says, “tell me how I am to do that” (187). If the boy has been promoted to a God, the man has begun his own apotheosis, an elevation to a humble and mortal human being. When the man later says “I’m sorry,” it is thus the boy’s role to allow the father his weakness, that “it’s okay” (200). The boy’s progress mirrors the father’s initial adult competences: risk assessment, strategic choices, care, mental and physical stamina. He makes sure that the father drinks water, and he displays a rational frame of mind when the father worries that he will see deformed dead bodies. “It’s okay Papa. / It’s okay? / They’re already there. / I dont want you to look. / They’ll still be there,” the boy reasons, accepting the world as it is (203). As a final demonstration of the father’s boon, the boy thus verifies that he is able to grow into being the adult the man wants him to become.

Later, the boy confronts the father, who wants to examine a house “because we dont like surprises” (225). To the father’s astonishment the boy first just says “okay” (225). “Okay? Just like that?” he wonders, with the realization that unexpected turns of events cannot be defined as good or bad beforehand, since most of them are significantly more complex. In this dialogue the exchange of “okays” is again associated with a preceding statement, this time the man’s aversion to surprises, and redirects the lesson, through the boy’s unexpected acceptance, which opens for an escalation of the man’s development. In his following frustration, the boy challenges the man to make a positive change: “You’re not going to listen to me. / I’ve been listening to you. / Not very hard” (225). The scene exemplifies that the protagonist, at this point of his development in a narrative, may have all the answers, but has yet to master how to practice them.

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The tension that has charged the “okays” changes to more sociable and relaxed expressions when they reach the ocean. They indulge in a fantasy that another father and son are sitting on a beach on the other side of the water: “That would be okay. / Yes. That would be okay. / And they could be carrying the fire too,” they agree (231). This vision contrasts with the father’s earlier disapproval of dreams, which make the mind stray from the harsh realities (202). In effect, he still eschews the notion that the complex and seemingly conflicting aspects of life form a unity that may serve as guidance in everyday life.

Coda: Unity through Balance and Cooperation

At the onset of the narrative conclusion, yet another act shift is marked by the absence of the word “okay” for ten pages. For the man and boy, the ocean was the external goal and with the lessons learned about what it takes to be adult, they pause and the man leaves the boy alone “to stand guard” while he takes a look at a half sunken ship in the water (238). Instead of worry, it is the mutual connection, the cooperative division of labor and respect for the other’s responsibility and competence that they now accentuate. The struggle to find a new world of normality takes off with eight “okays” of assessments and forgiveness when the man retrieves the gun they left behind, and they have to walk in the dark, hand in hand, because of the delay. “We’ll just take it one step at a time. / Okay. / Dont let go. / Okay” (249), they agree, referring metaphorically to their future, which marks the beginning of the fourth dramatic act.

The boy’s taxing rebirth into a new normality precedes and fuels the father’s. As the boy falls ill from food poisoning, the man’s utterances, like “you’re going to be okay” or “that’s okay” (269), accompany his more concrete efforts at care, until the final “okay” in the sequence signals the boy’s resurrection and the father’s staring adoration: “Stop watching me. / Okay. But he didnt” (270). The man has still not left all his ego behind, so before he can return as a master of both ideas and realities, he must be confronted with a final didactic provocation, which occurs

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when a thief takes their cart and food. For the first time it is a third person who utters the word “okay” repetitively in remorseful submission, indicating that he and the man are representations of one and the same character. The father must indeed learn to practice “what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand times . . . That is the hero’s ultimate difficult task,” as Campbell declares (188). Thus, he must go through the situation and observe his own manners in order to make sense of both his own and the stranger’s vulnerability and problems with respect, priorities, adaptability, trust, and compassion. As he leaves the other man naked in the cold, the boy passes judgment. Once again the father has to beg for forgiveness, and the boy says “okay” three times (279, 285).

Next, McCarthy employs the father’s physical wound from a previous encounter to illustrate the painful cleansing process (285). “Is it okay?” the boy asks as the man sutures his flesh. “Yeah. It’s okay. / Does it hurt? / Yes. It hurts,” the man admits. Previously, the word “okay” has at times served to bind contrasting perspectives together. Here, the physical and the mental wounds and processes of healing are juxtaposed, as are the textually concrete words and the abstract structure of the hero’s journey. In effect, the “okay” works on several levels to lay bare the lesson about the unity of complementing forces, as the man is about to enter the state of being master of both the idea and practice of adulthood.

As he is dying, the man tells the boy to continue talking to him after he is gone. “You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you’ll hear me. You have to practice. Just dont give up. Okay? / Okay. / Okay” (299). His final lesson is that he can live completely and eternally if he trusts the voice of another. “It’s okay, Papa. You dont have to talk. It’s okay,” the son confirms (299). Immediately after the man dies, the boy encounters a friendly family. The new man’s accepting and confirming “okays” give their dialogue a similar rhythm to the ones the boy had with his own father, who thus appears to be reborn as a family father, as a voice in the boy’s head, and as the adult narrating voice of the story all at once. In resonance with Christian mythology, he thus takes on the practical human form,

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the shape of the spirit or idea, and that of the all-seeing narrating creator in a vision of what an adult should strive for, but not necessarily expect to be.

Thus far, we have seen how the novel's rich use of the word "okay" highlights, introduces, ends, and frames sequences of importance for the representation of adulthood. The thematic argument takes its stance from an ego-centric and innocent view on adulthood based on care and invalid principles. As the man is confronted with the burden of complex responsibilities, a sense of self-awareness paves the way for goal-oriented reason and faith, before a more mature view on adulthood is developed, foregrounding balance, cooperation, unity. This leads to the question of how this thematic rhetoric is adapted and transformed in the screenplay and film. With a drastically reduced frequency of the word "okay" in the dialogue, each instance had to have an even clearer purpose in these versions of *The Road*, to maintain a thematic continuity and fidelity to the spirit of novel. Yet, like all other novels that are adapted for the screen with box office expectations in the background, the screenplay and film had to appease the common cinematic preferences for dialectic approaches, social action, and community, to some extent on behalf of the novel's spiritual qualities.

The Screenplay and Film

When the director John Hillcoat suggested purchasing the rights to McCormac's manuscript even before the novel was published, it was not just the scenes of children being eaten and McCarthy's vision of a "glaucomic world" (Danta 10) of gray that made the film studio hesitate (*EW*). The novel's genre, style, and language, together with its subsequent critical success and popularity, created a problem for Hillcoat and the adapting screenwriter Joe Penhall, who both immediately revered the novel. Hence, in Penhall's mind, "the voice had to be McCarthy's. I had to write the script as if McCarthy were writing it" ("Interview" 133). With the ambition "to trust McCarthy's story-telling and not be tempted to reformulate it" (Penhall, *Independent*), he was pleased to find the order of the scenes

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to be “carefully calibrated” so that little change had to be made in the plot structure (Penhall, “Interview” 133). As a bridge between the novel and film versions, between media specific conventions, and “to fully capture McCarthy’s coruscating lilt” (Penhall *Last*), Penhall included a voiceover in the script. Still, Stacey Peebles submits that their reverence for the novel might have prevented Hillcoat and Penhall from “productively superimpos[ing] Hillcoat’s vision with McCarthy’s.”

Inevitably, the conventions of both screenwriting and film affected the transformation of the novel into a screenplay and into the subsequent feature film, with its aspirations for box office success attached to it. The novel’s pensive and abstract impressionistic imagery had to be translated into a film version, which Miller finds “leaves less room for interpretation. As the world dies around the father and son, the ground trembles, trees uproot, fires ignite with a seeming randomness, and the air is thick with smoke and ash” (47). However, it is only on the superficial, visual plane that her judgment might be valid. Penhall observes that “fire, water and pianos are all things we interact with to make them work—so on screen you see a character interacting” (“Interview”133). This interaction creates room for interpretation. One of the effects of this shift from the novel’s focus on the oral discourse between man and boy to the screenplay’s and film’s physical engagement with objects and matter is the drastic reduction in frequency of the word “okay.” Nevertheless, the word still matters for the thematic presentation, especially for the spectator who has read the novel.

The somewhat conventional adaptation strategy created several problems that Penhall and Hillcoat had to take into account. First, potential audiences had visual references from other films and news media that they would draw inferences from, imagery that was not necessarily present in the novel. Hillcoat explains:

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The shopping cart, all the possessions, the dirty ski jacket. That's such a precise view of a familiar thing that we all know, that is, the homeless we all see on the street. We looked at actual photos of smaller postapocalypses that have happened, like mountains blowing up or Katrina. Whether it's 9/11 or Hiroshima or any of these things, man-made or natural, that's the imagery that came to me when I was reading the book as opposed to any of the CGI spectacles of the film genre. So we ended up not referencing postapocalyptic films at all, but rather looked at films like *The Bicycle Thief*, which is a father-and-son film. (EW)

Another consequence of the reduction of dialogue is that lighting, camerawork, editing, and scene descriptions had to dramatize the novel's "narrative shifts between humanity and brutality, . . . lyrical warmth and dissonant dread," as Miller observes that the score, in particular, manages to do (50).

Setup: Detachment and the Need for Unity

With all this in mind, the question is how the screenplay and the film employ the remaining and added occurrences of the word "okay" as a rhetorical resource, and how they complement the novel as versions of the same story. The first indication of a different strategy than that of the novel comes from the recurring use of the word "distant," which is repeated in the first scene descriptions of the screenplay (3, 4), as an initial key to understanding the relation between the man and his wife and between the man and the boy. This is illustrated not only by the emphasized misunderstanding between the man and the woman in the face of the approaching catastrophe, but also when the boy first wakes up in the wilderness. In the novel, his morning greeting, "Hi Papa" (3), confirms that he knows the father is there when he wakes up, but in the screenplay and the film he wonders, as the world trembles, where the man is: "Papa? (NO REPLY.) Papa?" (4). Although the man

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responds that “it’s okay” (4), the distance and silence between them is stressed by the inserted descriptive element in the boy’s worried and restated question. The dramatic implication is that the bond between them has to be okayed every time they wake up. Notably, compared with the novel, this scene has been moved to the beginning in the screenplay to modify the relational setup, Penhall’s and Hillcoat’s ambitions of fidelity notwithstanding.

Initially, in the screenplay and film, instances of care and intimacy between man and boy are rare. In the screenplay, they are limited to occasions when they stand beside one another or to occurrences of the pronoun “they,” for instance when they travel, or when they jump, startled by a falling tree (6). In the film version of the latter scene, the boy is drawn to the father, who puts a protective arm around him. The film also clearly dramatizes their silent cooperation as they pull and push their cart through the terrain.

The scene where the man shows the boy how to commit suicide is also moved to an earlier point in the screenplay and film, to demonstrate the father’s problematic and insecure parenting and his awareness of these shortcomings. In the film, the boy first whispers “okay,” while the man instructs. When the father has completed the demonstration and asks “is it okay?” (11), the boy confirms with another hesitant “okay.” The screenplay is remarkably concise here, given that what occurs would be laden with anxiety for them both. A sentence stating that the man “cuddles the BOY close” afterwards is directly followed by the action text “they set off again” (11). The apparent brevity of the comforting moment in the screenplay thus indicates the emotional reserve between the two, as if the text distances itself from emotional expression to reinforce the interpretation.

The father’s detachment is also demonstrated by the boy’s continual assessment of their relationship, which also illustrates the boy’s role as the father’s mentor. As he does in the novel, he tells the father that he has to watch the man all the time to make sure that he too eats and drinks (13). It is the boy who reasons that they do not know what lies ahead in a dark tunnel, whereas the father brushes

To be published in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2020.

those worries away, with the opinion that “it’s just the same as it is out here. Okay?” Metaphorically, to him, there is little difference between mankind’s, or his own, external actions and the beliefs and ethics on the inside. The “okay” commands the boy to accept the man’s non-intuitive evaluation without any reasoning, which he does, “VERY RELUCTANT,” the screenplay states (14). Again, the “okay” signals distance and separation, rather than comfort and care, in act one of the screenplay and the film. Only when they run through the forest and the boy falls does the man care to ask about the boy’s well-being and whether he is “okay” (16). However, at the end of this sequence of scenes, a change occurs in the man’s attitude, as he lets his inner emotional engagement take over. When the boy is in shock after the father has shot the hostile gang member, he repeatedly tells the boy “it’s okay” (20), while holding him close, with all the care and protecting instinct that was wanting before. The same scene, more intense in the screenplay and film than in the novel, indicates the transition to a commitment to change in all three versions.

Complication: Rejected Responsibilities, Loss, and Belonging

The rhetoric of the second act’s complicating inventory of contrasting elements, which conventionally leads to “the harmonization of all the pairs of opposites” (Campbell 95), reinforces the impression of the screenplay’s and film’s departure from the novel’s thematic rhetoric. In the screenplay of *The Road*, this is made manifest in a rhythmic dialogue between opposites, through the strategy to let most “okays” infer conclusions and to dramatize their following reversals.

A first pair of opposites is constituted by the bond between father and son, and by their bond to the dead mother, respectively signifying their goal to find a new world and their wish to leave this world behind. During an intimate bedtime conversation, the boy asks whether they are going to die, to which the man replies impassively with a rational statement that it depends on whether they reach the coast. In the film, the authority of his reasoning about these complexities of life is

To be published in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2020.

underscored by a concluding “okay,” which leaves the boy with an uncertainty, expressed by his subdued and disappointed “okay” (28). The conditioned prospect of survival prompts the boy to express a wish to die to be with his mother. The sensation is obviously shared, but yet not fully acknowledged by the man, and their intimacy is reversed to a distance of silence as the man, stunned by his own emotions, has no response to give. At this point, their yearning for what is missing inhibits, rather than aids, their ambitions to move forward.

Later, a sequence of dialogue asks what makes the bad distinct from the good and what “carrying the fire” actually entails (41), as the man’s sense of responsibility, emotional balance, and self-awareness are tested further. The man’s repeated assurances that everything is going to be “okay” (Penhall 31, 34) leads to an encounter with a cannibalistic group and the prisoners who constitute their food supply. In the screenplay, the man first escapes his responsibility as an adult and hands the gun to the boy, only to realize that the boy cannot shoot himself. He takes the gun back and aims it at the boy’s forehead (38), causing his son to experience the same terror as the prisoners of the bad guys, who are literally waiting to be consumed.

Presently, the man’s emotional control returns, as the theme of loss and belonging re-occurs, first when they find a can of Coca-Cola and the boy states he will “never get to drink another one” (42). In the film the man looks tenderly at the boy, while he tastes it, but the emphasis in the screenplay lies on the man’s reaction. Once more, he “doesn’t know what to say” (42). His bewilderment makes him retreat emotionally, and when the boy believes he hears a dog, the father says commandingly that “it’s gone, okay” (43), speaking just as much about the life and pleasures he once had. However, the “okay” is also the link to their encounter with the father’s childhood home, which he explores, again reminiscing nostalgically over times of harmony long since gone, reminders of a life of traditional values and hope. The boy, on the other hand, has no such references that he wants to re-experience. Instead, it is when he believes he sees another boy that he cries out in alarm, realizing that he needs to see him again to confirm that he too has

To be published in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2020.

something out there to belong to. While life for the father lies in the past, only the future exists as a hopeful reference for the boy. Encountered with these complexities and relationships between opposites, the man sees the scope of the state of affairs and confirms this with an apology: “Okay, I’m sorry. I understand” (48), he concludes.

Development: To Hope, Believe, and Trust

As the screenplay and film confront the core thematic issues in the second half, they suggest that trust, hope, and faith are necessary for an adult sense of community and belonging. In contrast to previous reversals of notions and perspectives, the man and boy now find the shelter and the food they need, with the man assuring the boy twice that “it’ll be okay” to enter the abandoned bunker (57). However, this immediately raises ethical questions about the right to take what belongs or has belonged to someone else, and the conditioned demarcation between individual and common property (62). Temporarily safe, the father’s ostensibly ethical code is revealed, as he pronounces the idea that people share a notion of the greater good. Until this point, a place to call home has eluded them in their struggle for momentary survival, but the awareness that there might still be resources left in the world for a decent life also raises their hopes for a restoration of a sense of belonging linked to a place. The man’s aptitude for tending to a home and family in a more civilized way is also brought to life more clearly in the screenplay and film than in the novel, through the prolonged duration of the sequence of scenes in the bunker, which follows from the initiating “okay.” Also important is the aspect of pleasure—the Coca-Cola and the swim by the waterfall—since this brings relief from the pragmatics of staying alive. Together, the sensations of home and pleasure allow the man and boy to reconnect as individual persons rather than as survivors. This prepares the man for a confrontation with his own disconnection from faith, hope, and people.

To be published in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2020.

However, the instability of these aspects of the man's adult character is exposed as the boy senses a long-term hope, believing he hears a dog, and the man discards the idea that the shelter experience is more than a momentary pause, by stating that "there is no dog, okay" (66), using the "okay" to cement the fact. When the boy, in response, begs him to say they are going to be all right, the man is forced to admit that he always expects the worst to come.

When they later meet the old vagrant, the father first uses the word "okay" to check the other man's status (70) and then to attract the boy's attention when it is time to go to sleep (71). The first "okay" establishes a connection and the second turns the subject of the men's conversation to children, hope, and faith. Like he does in the novel, the man confesses that the boy "is a God" to him (71), but the stranger's disheartened and cynical attitude toward humanity and hope—the idea that each and every one of us is on our own—tempts the man to return to and share this bleak view. As a reaction, the screenplay stresses how the boy later looks at the man in defiance, "for the first time, a new distance between them" (73). The climax of this sequence of events is reached when the boy declares that the man can no longer tell good from bad (73). Thus, the screenplay links the capacity to make ethical judgments to a basic faith in mankind and community, through the dialectic confrontation of attitudes, a lesson taught to the man and the audiences alike. Yet the contrast between the man's passionate relationship to the boy and the general worldview which he expresses illustrates the problem of keeping a core belief active through the hardships of everyday practice.

Coda: Autonomy and Humility, Care, and Reliance

The fourth act's initial display of how the gained thematic wisdom is practiced, when it is put to test by everyday life, begins with the boy falling ill, so the father must turn his attention to the boy's health. He resumes the mantra, "it's okay. You're going to be okay" (79), but he also says a self-accusing prayer: "Oh no. No no. Not this. Jesus Christ what have you done to us" (80). Shortly thereafter, the pattern is repeated

To be published in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2020.

when their things are stolen; the man comforts the boy, saying “it’s okay,” only to blame his own failure for being fully responsible and instilling the boy with hope (82). So, when the boy adopts the man’s despair, the father pronounces a declaration of hope out of loyalty: “Look there are other people and we’ll find them. You’ll see. . . . Please. Listen to me. Don’t lose heart” (82–83).

The conflict between his articulated ideals and his practices climaxes in connection with his cruel revenge on the thief. On the boy actor Kodi Smit-McPhee’s initiative, the concluding screenplay scene in this sequence was altered in temper in the film (Hillcoat, “Audio”). Up until this point, it is mostly the father who has used the word “okay,” with the purpose of instructing and commanding, and he has done so with emotional restraint, as if to charge the expression with rational standards. In this scene, the father defends his own actions, in an attempt to enter the same mode, and explains that the burden of responsibilities makes him vulnerable to imperfection. However, his conclusion, that the boy is not the one who has to worry about everything, lets a certain despair shine through, and the boy responds with frustrated passion: “Yes I am. I am the one” (87). The emotional emphasis is largely produced by the acting and an extra word that Smit-McPhee adds to the dialogue, which is neither in the novel nor in the screenplay, as he pauses before he exclaims, forcefully and conclusively, “okay” (1.23.07). This line demonstrates the boy’s awakened autonomy and authority in a way that the novel and screenplay never do as intensely.

This is the father’s last important lesson, that responsibilities are always collaborative and shared in a community, and that being adult involves an acknowledgment of others’ agency and feelings, as well as an awareness of one’s own shortcomings and emotional reactions. To that effect he has finally learned the importance of an adaptive relationship to others. As he dies from the illness he has carried in silence, it is the boy’s turn to say “you’re going to be okay” (95), while the father delivers the final message about conviction, togetherness, responsibility,

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efforts, and hope, and concludes with his last encouraging “okays”: “Just don’t give up, okay? You’ll be okay” (96).

At the end of the story, brief “okays” are used to negotiate the new relationship between the boy and the arriving veteran, who invites him into his family, while the word also establishes a link between the stranger and the boy’s father, and thereby trust and common values. When a new mother finally makes her entry, she is the first to use “okay” in an open question, asking if the boy wants to join them. Unlike the novel and the screenplay, the film ends with the boy’s “okay,” before distant, friendly voices signal the future community while the end credits are displayed on the screen. The endings of the screenplay and film thus depart from the novel’s projected humanization of the holy trinity and instead emphasize the hope for a new beginning and a developed sense of human adulthood.

The Good Guys’ Adulthood Code

I have tried to demonstrate how a single commonplace word, “okay,” is used to guide the reader and spectator through a thematic argument in *The Road*. McCarthy’s novel, Penhall’s screenplay, and the film directed by Hillcoat make sometimes related, sometimes divergent uses of the word “okay,” and hence allow for complementary thematic insights about adulthood through the three versions of the narrative. Naturally, the reduction of the number of “okays” in the screenplay, cut further still in the film, affect the rhetorical structure. However, it is the film that most clearly lets the word “okay” accentuate specific instances of thematic value, so that also the spectator who has not read the novel can observe the word’s multifaceted, rhetorical relevance. Whereas the novel foregrounds a dialogic approach as it reasons about adulthood, the screenplay and film make use of a clearer dialectical rhetoric, perhaps as a result of the cinematic tradition of presenting clear protagonist–antagonist relationships. Although, the novel, too, builds on the contrast between the good and bad guys, it is clear that the strategic

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choices regarding discourse and poetics affect the thematic representation of adulthood. For instance, the internal-spiritual dimension of the novel's hopeful ending is replaced, in the screenplay and above all the film, with an externalized, social aspect, with the importance of hope and belonging still well-defined.

However, as complementing versions, the novel, screenplay, and film make the argument that innocent care and unsustainable adult principles often go hand in hand with detachment, when unity is instead called for. A lost sense of belonging, the social uprootedness, can also make adults insecure, *The Road* seems to suggest, so that they might be inclined to deflect the burden of complex responsibilities. However, the narratives demonstrate that with a growing self-awareness comes the strength to have faith, set goals, trust in reason and others. In the end, the "Good Guys' Adulthood Code of *The Road*" involves a complex set of competencies that must be balanced, involving care and cooperation, a sense of autonomy and humility, emotional intelligence and control.

As Stacey Peebles observes, adaptations can be considered to offer experiences of liminality, similar to the one suffered by the characters in *The Road*. Being the apocalyptic tale that it is, *The Road* invites a mind game comprised of alternative visions and revelatory dialogue in all three versions of the story. If the reader/spectator's mind flickers between them, an even more elevating revelation might be reached than can be provided by any single version of the story.

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