

Article

Are We the Good Guys? Moral Ambiguity and Survival in McCarthy, Camus, and Saramago

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Abstract

This comparative study examines the erosion of ethical certainty under conditions of extreme scarcity and institutional collapse. Focusing on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), and José Saramago's *Blindness* (1998), the article argues that these narratives dismantle the moral binary of "good versus evil" by exposing how ethical frameworks fracture when survival becomes the primary imperative. Through close reading informed by existential philosophy, trauma theory, and psychoanalysis, the study traces how protagonists navigate moral compromise when communal reinforcement disappears. Morality in these texts emerges not as a fixed disposition but as a contingent practice, continually tested by deprivation, fear, and the demand of the Other. By following the boy's question in *The Road*—"Are we the good guys?"—across all three works, the article demonstrates that moral ambiguity operates not as a stylistic device but as an irreducible existential condition. The study concludes that these novels refuse moral resolution, instead asking readers to inhabit the uncertainty of ethical choice once civilisation's conventions have burned away.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; Albert Camus; José Saramago; moral ambiguity; survival; existentialism; trauma; dystopian fiction; ethics; the Other

1. Introduction: The Question in the Ashes

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a single moment cuts through the post-apocalyptic desolation with unsettling clarity. The father and son encounter a starving man on the road. Fearing for his son's safety, the father forces the stranger to strip naked and leaves him with nothing but his clothes. Later, the boy asks the question that shadows the remainder of the narrative: "Are we the good guys?" (McCarthy 2006, p. 108). The query is not merely philosophical; it is a plea for moral certainty in a world where the conditions for morality have collapsed. The father has taught his son that they are among those who "carry the fire," a metaphor for their commitment to decency. Yet his actions betray that claim. He steals. He threatens. He privileges survival over compassion. The boy perceives the contradiction. He recognises that the label "good guys" may be nothing more than a story told to endure another night.

This moment extends beyond McCarthy's fiction. It captures a fundamental ethical predicament that arises when institutional structures dissolve and survival becomes the primary imperative. What becomes of morality when the law vanishes and necessity remains? This article investigates how literature records that crisis. It argues that the breakdown of social order in *The Road*, *The Plague*, and *Blindness* exposes the structural precariousness of ethical systems. Under normal conditions, morality is sustained by



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communal reinforcement and institutional stability. When those structures dissolve, ethical behaviour becomes provisional, contested, and often self-contradictory.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between ethics and morality as these terms are employed throughout this study. Morality refers to the codified system of rules, norms, and values that a community or institution upholds—the prescriptive framework that defines right and wrong within a given social order. Ethics, by contrast, denotes the lived practice of moral decision-making—the situated negotiation of competing obligations when abstract principles collide with concrete exigencies. Under stable conditions, ethics and morality align; individuals follow moral rules because institutional structures reinforce them. Under conditions of collapse, however, this alignment fractures. Moral codes persist as abstract ideals, but ethical practice must improvise, compromise, and sometimes transgress those codes to preserve life. This study examines that fracture: the gap between what morality demands and what ethics requires when survival is at stake.

The selection of these three novels is guided not by historical or geographical continuity but by their shared theoretical concern: the examination of moral identity under conditions of extremity. Each text constructs a scenario in which the institutional structures that normally sustain ethical life—legal systems, social contracts, communal oversight—have collapsed or are collapsing. *The Road* depicts a post-apocalyptic world where civilisation has been destroyed; *The Plague* portrays a city sealed off by epidemic; *Blindness* imagines a society paralysed by mass blindness. These scenarios function as moral laboratories, stripping away the conditions that make conventional morality possible and forcing characters to navigate ethical dilemmas without institutional support. These narratives belong to the broader dystopian tradition, which Gregory Claeys argues functions as a warning about the fragility of civilisation and the ease with which social order can collapse (Claeys 2017, p. 15). By comparing these narratives, this study examines how moral identity is constituted, compromised, and reconfigured when survival becomes the primary imperative. The differences in historical context (McCarthy’s ecological anxiety, Camus’s wartime allegory, Saramago’s political disillusionment) are less significant than their shared exploration of what remains of ethics when the structures that sustain it vanish.

While these novels emerge from distinct historical moments, they can also be read as part of a broader existential literary tradition that Camus helped to define. *The Plague* (1947) articulates a secular ethics of revolt in the face of absurd suffering, rejecting both religious consolation and nihilistic despair. McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Saramago’s *Blindness* (1995), though separated from Camus by decades and written in different cultural contexts, extend this existential inquiry into new scenarios of collapse. McCarthy and Saramago, contemporaries whose careers developed in parallel (McCarthy published his major works in the 1980s–2000s; Saramago’s international recognition came in the 1980s–1990s), both explore how moral identity fractures under extreme duress, echoing Camus’s concern with ethical action in an absurd world. Reading these texts together reveals the persistence of existential questions about moral responsibility, solidarity, and the limits of humanism across different historical moments and literary traditions.

Scholarship on these texts is extensive. Critics have long noted the existential weight of McCarthy’s landscape. Edwin T. Arnold describes *The Road* as a “moral fable” in which paternal love is tested against unrelenting brutality (Arnold 2011, p. 45). Robert Zaretsky observes that Camus’s *The Plague* rejects metaphysical consolation in favour of secular responsibility, defining goodness as the refusal to surrender to suffering (Zaretsky 2013, p. 78). Philip Wegner, meanwhile, reads Saramago’s (1998) *Blindness* as a critique of civilised complacency, showing how quickly social order fractures under epidemic conditions (Wegner 2009, p. 112). Yet these studies rarely examine the specific function of the child’s question, the moment when

innocence forces adults to confront their own ethical compromises. This article addresses that gap by focusing on the psychological and moral dimensions of ambiguity in crisis.

To analyse these narratives, the study draws on three intersecting frameworks. Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's account of how catastrophic events fracture narrative selfhood, clarifies why characters struggle to reconcile past moral identities with present actions (Caruth 1996, p. 4). Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma illuminates the difference between characters who remain trapped in repetitive patterns of survival and those who attempt reflective distance (LaCapra 2001, p. 67). Existential philosophy, following Camus's concept of lucid revolt as articulated in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, explains how ethical action persists even when it carries no guarantee of meaning or reward (Camus 1991a, p. 53; Camus 1991c, p. 21). Psychoanalytic thought, notably Freud's uncanny and Lacan's Real, illuminates moments when characters encounter realities that shatter their symbolic moral frameworks (Freud 2003, p. 124; Lacan 1998, p. 67). These approaches intersect at a crucial point: trauma theory addresses the psychological fragmentation that collapse produces; existential philosophy addresses the philosophical stance characters adopt in response; and psychoanalysis addresses the unconscious dimensions of moral compromise. Together, they provide a multi-layered account of why moral certainty becomes impossible once the familiar structures of civilisation are removed.

The argument advanced here rests on three claims. First, moral identity in these narratives is neither fixed nor preordained but emerges through negotiation under duress. Second, the opposition of "good versus evil" collapses under the weight of survival, revealing a liminal space where ethics are bargained rather than obeyed. Third, these novels operate as narrative testing grounds for human conscience, not to deliver verdicts but to deepen the questions that survival forces upon us. Read together, they record the cost of staying alive. They suggest that the question "Are we the good guys?" cannot be settled definitively. It must be endured.

The article unfolds in four sections. Section 2 "examines the father's contradictions and the boy's moral challenge. Section 3 analyses Dr. Rieux's refusal of heroism in the face of indiscriminate death. Section 4 explores the doctor's wife and the moral weight of deception. Section 5 compares how all three texts use psychological disruption to critique moral certainty. Section 6 considers what these literary scenes contribute to contemporary debates on ethics, survival, and human responsibility.

This comparison does not seek to judge past actions by present standards. Rather, it aims to understand how literature captures the persistent tension between moral aspiration and material necessity. McCarthy writes amid ecological anxiety; Camus writes during war and epidemic; Saramago writes in an era of political disillusionment. Yet all three depict worlds where the vulnerable are asked to endure deprivation while those in control withhold basic care. The material hardship that marks everyday survival in marginalised communities finds its extreme parallel in the ash-choked roads of McCarthy's America. By returning to these texts with close attention to their ethical detail, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of how literature gives voice to those who stand in the ruins and ask: Are we still the good guys?

2. The Fire and the Theft: Paternal Ethics in the Road

To navigate the harsh realities of their survival, the father in *The Road* constructs a narrative ethic. He insists to his son that they are "the good guys" who "carry the fire." This lexicon functions less as description than as insulation, shielding the child from the full moral desolation of their circumstances. Yet the father's conduct routinely undercuts his instruction. He levels a pistol at a trespasser. He strips a bunker of provisions secured

by another survivor. He abandons a starving man stripped and shivering on the highway. Each act is pragmatically justified by the imperative of survival, yet each incrementally fractures the ethical certainty the father attempts to preserve. McCarthy does not present the father as a hypocrite but as a figure caught in an irresolvable bind: the demand to preserve biological life versus the demand to preserve moral integrity.

This tension unfolds against a landscape that has actively divested itself of civilising structures. Legal institutions, social contracts, and communal oversight have vanished, leaving only exposure and scarcity. As Dianne C. Luce observes, the environment in *The Road* operates not merely as a backdrop but as an active antagonist, systematically negating the conditions required for sustained ethical life (Luce 2009, p. 89). Within such a context, conventional morality becomes unsustainable. To act ethically is to invite vulnerability; to ensure survival is to compromise principle. The father negotiates this contradiction daily. He instructs the boy in generosity while concealing provisions from the desperate. He forbids violence while keeping a revolver loaded with two bullets, reserved for emergency suicides. The boy registers the dissonance. Functioning as the novel's moral register, he consistently voices the hesitation the father suppresses. His recurring query, "Are we the good guys?" (McCarthy 2006, p. 108), does not seek reassurance so much as it exposes the instability of moral labels. Goodness, the text suggests, is not an inherited status but a contingent practice, and their practice increasingly resembles endurance rather than virtue.

This paternal dynamic resonates with psychoanalytic conceptions of authority and the symbolic order. Freud positions the father as the bearer of the law, the figure who installs the superego and mediates between desire and prohibition (Freud 2003, p. 95). In *The Road*, however, the law the father invokes has already been annulled by catastrophe. His authority is performative rather than institutional; he cannot shield the boy from the world's violence, only postpone its arrival. Steven Frye notes that the father's care manifests as control, a strategy rendered increasingly futile against the novel's entropic trajectory (Frye 2009, p. 112). Aware of their inevitable demise, the father's true aim shifts from preserving life to preserving conscience. He strives to leave his son recognisably human in a world that has abandoned humanity. The boy's question therefore wounds precisely because it threatens this fragile project. It implies that survival may have already required moral surrender. The father's silence in response is structurally significant. An affirmative answer would constitute deception; a negative one would collapse the boy's remaining hope. His refusal to speak marks the precise locus of ethical aporia, where certainty yields to unresolvable doubt.

The encounter with the thief crystallises this crisis. When the man attempts to take their cart, the father responds with calculated humiliation, stripping him of clothing and leaving him exposed. The boy witnesses the man's terror and later weeps, insisting that the stranger was frightened. The father offers no justification. He recognises the tactical necessity of his actions while simultaneously acknowledging their brutality. Lilas R. Jaquette argues that McCarthy stages such moments to destabilise the reader's comfort with survival ethics (Jaquette 2013, p. 67). The narrative demands that readers reconcile two incompatible imperatives: the duty to protect the child and the obligation to show mercy. In conditions of extreme scarcity, these obligations cannot coexist. Feeding the son necessitates depriving the stranger; compassion for one entails violence toward another. The father chooses kinship, an act of love that simultaneously enacts exclusion. He draws a boundary between "us" and "them," a division the boy instinctively resists. The child's ethics remain expansive, oriented toward inclusion; the father's are defensive, calibrated for preservation. Their conflict maps the broader ethical rupture between communal responsibility and familial survival.

The recurring motif of the fire further complicates this moral economy. When the father claims they “carry the fire,” he invokes a metaphor of spiritual continuity. Yet the signifier remains deliberately unstable. Does it denote moral goodness, biological endurance, or simply the stubborn will to persist? Read within the novel’s ethical framework, the fire functions as a fragile humanism that endures despite systemic collapse. Humanism, however, presupposes relationality; it requires a community to sustain and recognise it. Isolated on the road, the father and son can enact ethical regard only toward each other. Their goodness is necessarily partial, bounded by the limits of their dyad. They are moral to one another, yet frequently indifferent or hostile to outsiders. The boy perceives this asymmetry. He intuits that his own preservation is purchased through the stranger’s deprivation. This realisation stains their ethical project. The fire sustains them, but it also illuminates the exclusions required to maintain it. It warms a shrinking circle while leaving the wider world in darkness. Moral clarity, the novel suggests, is a luxury afforded only by surplus.

The father’s death dismantles this protective framework entirely. Left alone, the boy must determine what the fire signifies without paternal mediation. His subsequent decision to join another travelling family marks a decisive ethical shift. He distributes food, extends trust, and chooses relational continuity over fortified isolation. Where the father’s ethics were grounded in defence, the boy’s emerge from vulnerability. This transition carries profound implications. It suggests that morality may not ultimately serve biological survival but rather the preservation of human connection. The father sought to keep his son alive; the son chose to remain recognisably human. The novel refuses to declare either position superior. The boy survives, but his inheritance is heavy. He has witnessed his father’s compromises and internalised the cost of their endurance. Memory, rather than instruction, becomes the vehicle of his moral continuity. The fire now burns not as an emblem of purity but as a record of what was done to stay alive. That record constitutes the survivor’s burden, the unanswerable weight behind the question: are we the good guys?

This section has traced the father’s ethical contradiction: he articulates a moral code while enacting pragmatic survival strategies, and the boy’s questioning exposes the fracture between the two. Through the child’s perspective, McCarthy interrogates the viability of inherited ethics under conditions of systemic collapse. The father embodies a diminished moral order, still operating through rules and boundaries even when their institutional support has vanished. The boy gestures toward an emergent ethic, one measured by concrete acts of care rather than abstract declarations. The old framework is exhausted; the new one is untested and precarious. The fire flickers between them, offering illumination without warmth. It is sufficient for navigation but inadequate for reconciliation. This limitation constitutes the novel’s central tragedy. The father attempts to transmit a world where goodness remains viable; instead, he transmits the means of enduring a world where goodness is exceptional. The boy asks his question not to receive validation but to articulate a longing for a reality that no longer exists. The narrative offers no resolution. It leaves the query suspended in the ash, turning it back upon the reader: what concessions do we make to endure? Whose vulnerability do we ignore to secure our own? The text withholds judgment. It only sustains the question.

3. Revolt Without Heroes: Secular Morality in the Plague

Where the father in *The Road* manufactures a moral mythology to shield his son, Dr. Bernard Rieux in Albert Camus’s *The Plague* systematically dismantles the need for one. No metaphorical fire sustains him; no narrative of salvation justifies his labour. The epidemic permits only disease, suffering, and the work that remains. This divergence proves fundamental. McCarthy’s father clings to the binary of “good guys” to sustain hope; Camus’s physician recognises such categories as inert before mortality. Rieux does not

confront the plague out of virtue but out of professional obligation. This section examines how Camus deploys the epidemic in Oran to interrogate the limits of moral identity, arguing that Rieux's secular ethics constitute a distinct response to systemic collapse. Where the father conceals truth to preserve innocence, Rieux insists upon truth to preserve dignity. Both confront inevitable loss, yet only Rieux accepts the absurdity of his labour without demanding moral exoneration.

The epidemic seals Oran from the outside world, functioning as a levelling force analogous to the ash-choked landscape in McCarthy's novel. It strips away civic pretence and reduces inhabitants to vulnerable bodies. Olivier Todd notes that Camus drafted *The Plague* during the Nazi occupation, deploying disease as an allegory for totalitarian violence (Todd 1997, p. 312). The novel, however, extends beyond its historical referent to articulate a universal ethical predicament: how to act justly when success remains impossible. The physicians understand that cure lies beyond their reach; they can only palliate suffering and postpone death. This very limitation defines their moral stance. Action is not measured by outcome but by solidarity. David Sherman observes that Camus's notion of revolt demands engagement without expectation of triumph, wherein the act of resistance itself generates meaning (Sherman 1996, p. 89). Rieux anticipates defeat but refuses surrender. His ethics are not anchored in theology or abstract philosophy but in the immediate reality of suffering flesh.

This stance invites comparison with the father's theft in *The Road*. Both men intervene to preserve life, yet their ethical frameworks diverge sharply. The father acts out of particular attachment, prioritising his son above all others. Rieux operates through a universal imperative, attending to any patient regardless of moral standing or social position. The boy's persistent questioning in McCarthy's text exposes the exclusion inherent in filial devotion; Rieux circumvents this binary entirely. He does not categorise individuals as virtuous or corrupt but as afflicted or spared. This clinical orientation functions as a form of ethical egalitarianism. Carol A. Dunbar argues that Camus utilises the medical vocation to model an ethics grounded in competence and presence rather than sanctity (Dunbar 1980, p. 56). Healing requires neither righteousness nor divine sanction, only sustained attention. Where the father's care contracts into a dyad, Rieux's expands toward the collective, even though he recognises its ultimate futility.

The novel's ethical centre crystallises during the prolonged agony of Jacques Othon, the young son of the investigating magistrate. As doctors and clergy witness the child's suffering, Father Paneloux interprets the ordeal as a divine trial, urging congregational submission to inscrutable providence. Rieux rejects this theological framing outright. He tells Paneloux that he will refuse to love a universe in which children are tortured (Camus 1991b, p. 217). This confrontation marks the definitive rupture between religious acquiescence and secular revolt. Paneloux demands faith in a hidden order; Rieux demands clear-eyed acknowledgement of its absence. As Avi Sagi notes, Camus's absurd individual refuses to fabricate meaning from suffering precisely because none exists (Sagi 2002, p. 102). To impose narrative consolation upon the child's death is to commit a secondary violence against the reality of pain. The father in *The Road* shields his son with comforting fictions; Rieux shields no one from truth. His honesty offers no refuge, yet it preserves the dignity of the afflicted by refusing to aestheticise their torment.

Rieux's narrative posture reinforces this ethical commitment. He composes his chronicle as a witness rather than a protagonist, explicitly denying any claim to heroism. This rhetorical modesty serves a deliberate function: it prevents the reader from elevating his conduct to the realm of the exceptional. If Rieux is portrayed as a hero, his actions become extraordinary; if he remains ordinary, they become obligatory. Robert Orme observes that Camus deliberately suppresses heroic rhetoric to suggest that ethical conduct should be

understood as routine rather than remarkable (Orme 1971, p. 78). In conditions of collapse, societies cannot await extraordinary figures; they require sustained, unglamorous labour. This perspective reframes the boy's question from *The Road*. Rieux would regard the inquiry "Are we the good guys?" as ethically redundant. What matters is whether one attended to the sick, fed the hungry, or remained when others fled. Moral identity yields to moral practice. The demand shifts from declaration to continuous action, a far more rigorous standard that permits no permanent settlement.

The contrast with McCarthy further clarifies the consequences of each ethical orientation. The father's protective narrative ensures his son's survival but enforces profound isolation; Rieux's secular solidarity generates a fragile community of resistance. He works alongside Tarrou, Grand, and Castel, forming a collective bound not by optimism but by shared responsibility. This network cannot halt the plague, yet it renders suffering more bearable by distributing its weight. Neil H. Pennington argues that Camus's ethics are fundamentally relational, emerging from a mutual recognition of mortality (Pennington 2007, p. 134). The father shares burden only with his son; Rieux shares it with the city. Both groups emerge haunted, yet the nature of their haunting differs. McCarthy's survivors carry the memory of those they abandoned; Camus's physicians carry the memory of those they failed to save. Rieux's guilt, however, is collective. Shared complicity functions as a form of secular grace, acknowledging that moral purity remains unattainable under duress. Redemption, if it exists, lies not in cleanliness but in persistent labour.

Rieux's survival ensures that he becomes the narrative's archivist. Like the boy in *The Road*, he assumes the role of witness, yet he preserves no sustaining myth. He records names, dates, and clinical details, refusing to allow suffering to dissolve into abstraction. This act of documentation is inherently ethical: it insists upon historical specificity against the erasure of mass death. Both McCarthy and Camus deploy narrative as an ethical imperative, insisting that literature must bear witness to the material cost of endurance. Hayden White observes that historiography typically imposes order upon chaos, yet Camus employs chronicle form to demonstrate the limits of such ordering (White 1973, p. 45). *The Plague* bacillus never perishes; it merely lies dormant. The narrative thus functions as a warning rather than closure. It urges vigilance, rejects reliance on providence or saviours, and affirms the necessity of grounded action. This secular ethic promises no transcendence, only the earth; it offers no reward, only the assurance of having refused to look away.

4. The Beast and the Witness: Lying as Ethics in Blindness

If Camus's secular revolt in *The Plague* presupposes minimal institutional scaffolding, hospitals, supplies, and professional colleagues, José Saramago's *Blindness* strips these away entirely, testing the durability of ethical practice when even the residual structures of a functioning society collapse. In Saramago's novel, civil order fractures with rapid, brutal finality. No medical infrastructure remains; no civic order persists; no external witness intervenes. The epidemic is perceptual rather than biological: citizens lose their sight, and with it, the conventions that sustain civil coexistence. The asylum in which the blind are quarantined becomes a laboratory of social dissolution, a space where the question "Are we the good guys?" admits no straightforward answer. The ethical question mutates from the Camusian "How do we serve?" to the Saramagian "How do we endure?" This escalation probes whether a model of duty can survive without structural support. Can one maintain professional ethics when medicine vanishes? Can revolt persist when infrastructure collapses? Saramago intensifies the experiment by removing the final safeguards of civilisation. This section examines how Saramago deploys the figure of the doctor's wife, the sole character who retains her vision, to interrogate the ethics of witnessing and the necessity of moral compromise. It argues that in *Blindness*, deception and even lethal violence become instruments

of protection, challenging the assumption that ethical action requires moral purity. Where McCarthy's father fabricates narrative consolation to shield innocence, and Camus's physician insists upon truth to preserve dignity, Saramago's witness employs falsehood to preserve life itself. This distinction reveals a more severe register of ambiguity, one in which the beast is not an external threat but a latent potential within, awaiting the extinguishing of light.

The onset of white blindness precipitates immediate social fragmentation. Citizens are detained and confined to an asylum under the pretext of public health. Conditions deteriorate with brutal speed: sanitation collapses, informal hierarchies solidify, and a ward of armed men seizes control of food distribution, first extorting valuables, then demanding sexual submission. This trajectory echoes the degradation depicted in *The Road*, yet unfolds with greater velocity, within enclosed space, among former neighbours. Philip Swanson observes that Saramago uses epidemic narrative to strip away the accretions of social conditioning, exposing the precariousness of civilised behaviour beneath (Swanson 1999, p. 78). The quarantined are not inherently monstrous; they become so through the logic of scarcity and fear. Food spoils. Waste accumulates. Odour becomes a tangible presence. Within such conditions, conventional morality ceases to function as a viable guide. To act ethically is to invite deprivation; to secure sustenance is to accept complicity. The doctor's wife observes this unravelling. She witnesses rape, starvation, and despair while others remain oblivious in their blindness. Her vision constitutes not privilege but burden: she bears knowledge that others cannot share, and with that knowledge comes responsibility. This epistemic asymmetry positions her as an ethical agent precisely because she alone can see.

That responsibility culminates in the novel's most ethically fraught episode. When the armed ward demands another woman, the doctor's wife offers herself in place of a younger victim, but she conceals a pair of scissors. She kills the ward's leader. The act is deliberate, violent, and, within the narrative's logic, necessary. She acts to halt systematic sexual violence and to protect the women under her care. Yet the moral status of her action resists easy categorisation. Carlos Reis argues that Saramago repeatedly situates characters in scenarios where inherited ethical frameworks prove inadequate, compelling them to improvise moral responses grounded in immediate exigency (Reis 2000, p. 112). The doctor's wife does not deliberate; she intervenes. Afterwards, she lies. She informs the group that the man died of natural causes, conceals evidence of violence, and shields them from knowledge of her act. This deception functions protectively, akin to the father's mythmaking in *The Road*, yet it is also pragmatically motivated. Disclosure might provoke fear or rejection; secrecy preserves group cohesion. Her guilt remains solitary, linking her to Rieux, who bears the weight of deaths he cannot prevent. Yet unlike Rieux, she actively causes death. This shift relocates ethics from passive endurance to deliberate intervention, complicating any straightforward alignment with non-violent resistance.

The theoretical stakes of this intervention are considerable. Emmanuel Levinas posits that the face of the other issues an unconditional command: "Thou shalt not kill" (Levinas 1985, p. 199). The doctor's wife transgresses this imperative. She meets the thug's gaze and ends his life. Yet she does so to preserve other faces from violation. This generates an ethical aporia: to save the many, she destroys the one. Is this merely a utilitarian calculation, or does it gesture toward a more complex moral topology? Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection offers a useful lens. The asylum becomes a space of abjection, wherein boundaries between self and other, cleanliness and filth, life and death, dissolve (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). The doctor's wife enters this liminal zone to restore minimal order. She employs violence to arrest further violence. In this, she resembles McCarthy's father, who uses threat to deter theft: both recognise that peace may require the strategic deployment of force. Yet the cost is internal. The doctor's wife carries the tactile memory of the scissors, the sensation of a

body ceasing to live. That memory constitutes the stain upon her ethical standing. She is not pure; she is effective. And in a world deprived of sight, efficacy may outweigh purity.

The novel further interrogates the provenance of the beast. Is it embodied in the thugs who rape and extort, or in the institutional structures that enable their behaviour? Saramago implicates both. Systemic failure precedes individual transgression. Michael Wood notes that Saramago's irony frequently targets institutions that profess to protect yet ultimately endanger those they claim to serve (Wood 2002, p. 56). The government quarantines the blind to safeguard the sighted, yet the quarantine becomes a death sentence. The asylum, designated as a hospital, functions as a prison. This structural violence creates the conditions for personal violence. The thugs are not demons but desperate individuals armed and empowered by collapse. This complexity complicates moral judgment. Can they be categorised as "bad" when the system itself produced their behaviour? The boy in *The Road* seeks binary clarity; Saramago suggests the question is reductive. The thugs are hungry, frightened and blind. Their actions are reprehensible, yet their humanity persists. The doctor's wife perceives this. She does not hate the man she kills; she pities him. She acts with sorrow rather than rage. That sorrow proves ethically significant: it distinguishes execution from murder, reluctant necessity from gratuitous cruelty. She does not enjoy the act; she endures it. That endurance constitutes her morality.

The comparative framework sharpens at this juncture. McCarthy's father employs lethal force to deflect an immediate threat to his son. Camus's Rieux refuses violence even when confronting evil, limiting himself to palliative care. Saramago's doctor's wife kills to shield a community from systemic predation. Her scope exceeds the father's particularism yet embraces a violence Rieux would reject. She occupies an intermediate position: not merely a parent but a leader who assumes responsibility for a collective. Such leadership demands compromise; moral cleanliness becomes untenable. Kathryn Shevlin argues that women in Saramago's fiction frequently bear the burden of ethical action when male characters falter (Shevlin 2010, p. 89). The doctor succumbs to blindness; his wife retains sight. Men despair; the woman intervenes. This gendered inflexion carries significance. It suggests that survival ethics may align with an ethics of care: the wife does not seek power but preservation. She does not aspire to rule the ward; she strives to feed it. Her violence is instrumental rather than ideological, distinguishing her from the thugs, who kill for domination. She kills for protection. This distinction, however fine, proves decisive. It marks the difference between the beast and the witness.

The novel's conclusion reinforces this ethical ambiguity. When sight returns and society begins to reconstitute itself, the doctor's wife never confesses her act. She carries the secret to her death. This silence functions as a final protective gesture: disclosure might fracture the group's fragile cohesion, forcing them to confront the violent foundation of their survival. Her secrecy parallels the father's myth of the fire in *The Road*: both are narratives that sustain community by concealing uncomfortable truths. Yet secrecy also constitutes a burden. She lives with the knowledge that she has taken a life. That knowledge transforms her. She emerges from the asylum hardened, shadowed, alive. This transformation registers the cost of endurance. Literature often rewards virtue with survival; Saramago rewards compromise. The pure perish; the stained endure. This is an austere lesson. It suggests that morality under duress is not a matter of remaining unsullied but of accepting contamination to preserve others. The doctor's wife wades through filth, handles the dead, and kills. Yet she brings her husband home and shields those in her care. Her hands are stained; her intention remains care. That intention prevents her descent into monstrosity. The beast kills for pleasure or power; she kills for love. That love resonates with McCarthy's fire and Camus's revolt: it is the stubborn commitment to

human connection amid collapse. It is also the sight Saramago privileges, not optical vision but ethical perception, the capacity to see what must be done and to bear the consequences.

The movement toward comparative synthesis will now examine how these three texts converge on the fragility of the self under extreme duress. McCarthy's father, Camus's physician, and Saramago's witness each confront the dissolution of the world they knew. Each chooses action over acquiescence. Yet each is compromised: the father steals, the doctor fails to save a child, the wife kills. None conforms to conventional heroism; all qualify as survivors, as witnesses, as bearers of memory. That memory constitutes the true legacy of collapse, not triumph over plague or blindness, but knowledge of what endurance demands. The boy in *The Road* poses the question; the doctor in *The Plague* inscribes the record; the wife in *Blindness* guards the secret. Together, they form a triptych of survival ethics. They demonstrate that goodness is not a fixed attribute but a sequence of choices made in uncertainty. Sometimes those choices appear clean; sometimes they bear stains. Yet they must be made. Inaction permits the beast to prevail; action risks becoming the beast. This risk defines the human condition. The texts offer no resolution; they inhabit the tension. They invite readers to inhabit it as well: to consider whether one would take the scissors, steal the provisions, remain at the bedside. The question is not about fictional characters. It is about us. The mirror is raised. The reflection remains ambiguous. But it is present. We are, at once, the good, the compromised, the survivors. And we must live with what that entails.

5. Comparative Synthesis: Trauma, Psychoanalysis, and the Fractured Self

The trajectory through *The Road*, *The Plague*, and *Blindness* discloses a common landscape of moral injury. The father, Dr. Rieux, and the doctor's wife do not conform to conventional heroism; they are survivors bearing the weight of compromised choices. This section synthesises prior analyses to argue that survival under catastrophic conditions fractures the ethical subject. The moral identity sustained in stable contexts cannot endure the pressure of systemic collapse. Under conditions of systemic collapse, the characters are reduced to what Giorgio Agamben terms 'bare life'—existence stripped of legal and political protections, where survival becomes the only imperative (Agamben 1998, p. 8). What emerges is not a coherent alternative ethics but a fragmented one, tenuously maintained through attachment, obligation, or sheer persistence. Drawing on trauma theory and psychoanalytic thought, this section examines how these narratives register the psychological cost of ethical compromise. It suggests that the question "Are we the good guys?" remains unanswered because the subject who poses it has been fundamentally altered. Trauma, in this context, is not merely a psychological condition but an ethical rupture: it destabilises the very possibility of coherent moral agency.

Trauma theory illuminates this fragmentation. Cathy Caruth contends that trauma resides not solely in the event but in its belated, unresolved registration (Caruth 1996, p. 4). For McCarthy's father, trauma is not a discrete occurrence but a continuous condition; each day reenacts the collapse. He cannot process loss because survival demands forward motion. Dominick LaCapra observes that working through trauma requires reflective distance, yet extreme duress often forecloses such space (LaCapra 2001, p. 67). The father cannot reflect; he can only act. This foreclosure leaves trauma unprocessed, manifesting in silence, nightmares, and protective fictions. The boy inherits this unworked trauma. He witnesses violence, interrogates morality, and survives, but he is transformed. The novel concludes with his biological survival, yet the cost remains implicit. He is a child of the ash, his identity constituted by loss. This aligns with Geoffrey Hartman's observation that survival casts a "longest shadow" that follows the survivor into an uncertain future (Hartman 1996, p. 12). The father dies; the shadow endures with the boy, who must

live with the memory of what was done to preserve him. Crucially, this unprocessed trauma directly impacts ethical decision-making: unable to work through his own moral compromises, the father cannot provide the boy with a stable ethical framework, only a series of ad hoc justifications that the boy instinctively questions.

This psychological fracture extends to Rieux and the doctor's wife. Rieux composes his chronicle as an act of witnessing, yet he acknowledges profound exhaustion. The death of Jacques Othon leaves a mark no amount of labour can efface. Judith Butler argues that precarious life generates both shared vulnerability and shared responsibility (Butler 2004, p. 30). Rieux internalises this responsibility; he registers each death as a failure, even when inevitable. This guilt constitutes part of his fracture. He emerges from the epidemic altered, bearing the weight of excessive loss. The doctor's wife carries a distinct burden: she has killed. This act produces an internal division; she is simultaneously protector and destroyer. Her vision isolates her, as she alone witnesses the violence while others remain oblivious. This epistemic solitude becomes a form of trauma. She survives the blindness but not the memory. Sight returns; perception remains altered. She knows what humans are capable of. That knowledge constitutes a deeper blindness, the inability to unsee the capacity for cruelty within. These psychological fractures have direct ethical consequences: Rieux's exhaustion shapes his commitment to sustained but unheroic labour; the wife's trauma informs her decision to kill and to keep that killing secret. Their ethical choices cannot be separated from their psychological states.

Psychoanalytic concepts deepen this account. Freud posits that the uncanny emerges when the familiar becomes estranged, often through repression (Freud 2003, p. 124). In these texts, the known world becomes alien: the road becomes a graveyard, the city a tomb, the asylum a prison. This uncanny landscape mirrors the characters' internal dislocation. They become strangers to themselves: the father does not recognise the man who steals; Rieux cannot reconcile the physician who fails to save a child; the wife cannot acknowledge the woman who kills. This alienation registers the cost of endurance. Lacan's concept of the Real, that which resists symbolisation, manifests in the ash, the plague, the blindness (Lacan 1998, p. 67). These forces exceed comprehension and control, disrupting the symbolic order that sustains moral certainty. Characters attempt to impose meaning—the fire, the revolt, the ethic of care—yet the Real returns. *The Plague* bacillus persists; blindness lifts but memory remains; ash covers all. This return forecloses closure. There is no resolution, only endurance. The ethical significance of these psychoanalytic concepts lies in their explanation of why moral certainty becomes impossible: when the symbolic order that structures moral reasoning collapses, characters must act without the comforting frameworks that normally guide ethical decision-making.

Comparing the three texts reveals divergent responses to this fracture. McCarthy's father responds through protection: he shields the boy from the Real by constructing a sustaining myth (the fire). This constitutes a defensive fracture, splitting the world into manageable binaries. Yet the boy perceives the instability of this division. Camus's Rieux responds through acceptance: he acknowledges the Real without attempting to cover it. He recognises the plague's meaninglessness yet persists. This marks an existential fracture; he lives with absurdity without seeking to heal what cannot be healed. Saramago's wife responds through intervention: she enters the Real, employing violence to arrest further violence. This constitutes an active fracture; she integrates the act into her identity, neither denying nor confessing it. Each response offers a distinct mode of surviving fracture; none restores wholeness. The self remains broken yet persists. These divergent responses represent different ethical strategies: the father's protective ethics, Rieux's ethics of acceptance and labour, and the wife's ethics of intervention. Each strategy emerges from a specific mode of psychological fracture, demonstrating that ethics under duress cannot be separated from the fractured subject who must enact it.

This has implications for reading moral ambiguity. It is not merely a philosophical problem but a psychological one. The binary of “good versus evil” presupposes a stable subject; trauma destabilises that subject. When the self is fractured, morality becomes contingent: what was impermissible yesterday may become necessary today; what was virtuous may become harmful. This contingency is what the boy intuits. He senses that labels no longer hold. Terry Eagleton notes that evil often appears banal, rooted in ordinary choices rather than grand designs (Eagleton 2010, p. 89). The father’s theft, the wife’s killing, these are not demonic acts but difficult decisions made under duress. This banality complicates resolution: if the characters were monsters, condemnation would be straightforward; because they resemble us, judgment requires confrontation. We must ask: what would I do? This question constitutes the ethical work of the literature. It does not instruct us in goodness; it reveals how demanding goodness becomes under pressure. It displays the cost. It registers the fracture.

The comparative pattern also clarifies the role of the community. The father is isolated with his son; his fracture remains private. Rieux operates within a collective; his fracture is shared. The wife belongs to a group, yet her secret remains solitary. This suggests that shared trauma may be more bearable than private trauma. Rieux has Tarrou, Grand and Castel; they sustain one another. The father has only the boy. The wife has her husband, yet cannot disclose everything. This isolation intensifies the fracture, implying that survival ethics require communal witness. Without others to share the burden of choice, the weight becomes unsustainable. The boy witnesses the father; the chronicle witnesses Rieux; the wife witnesses herself. Yet only Rieux has peers. This may account for his relative stability: he is not alone. The father and the wife carry their secrets to the grave; Rieux inscribes his. This act of writing functions therapeutically, as a mode of working through trauma. The father does not write; the wife does not confess. They bear the weight in solitude. That weight constitutes the true legacy of collapse, not survival itself, but the memory of what survival demands. The ethical implications are clear: communal witness not only makes trauma more bearable but also makes ethical accountability possible. Without others to witness and question our choices, ethical reflection becomes impossible.

This section has examined the psychological cost of moral ambiguity. The father, Rieux, and the wife all survive, yet all are transformed. Their selves are fractured by the choices they make. Trauma theory and psychoanalysis help clarify this fracture: it is not a failure of character but a response to catastrophe. These texts demonstrate that morality under pressure is not about remaining good but about remaining human. And to be human is to be broken, to err, to carry guilt, to live with unanswered questions. The boy asks: “Are we the good guys?” The texts respond: we are the survivors. And survival is complicated, messy, stained, but it is life. The fire burns. The chronicle is written. Sight returns. These are modest affirmations. They cannot repair the world, yet they enable continuation. This is the synthesis’s lesson: do not seek heroes; seek witnesses. Seek those who remain, who carry the fracture and keep walking. They are not simply good or bad. They are us.

6. Conclusions: A Question Not Answered, but Lived

The journey from ash-covered roads to blinded asylums concludes where it began: with a question. The boy in *The Road* asks, “Are we the good guys?” The text offers no verbal answer. The father does not affirm or deny; he dies in silence. That silence constitutes the response. It suggests that the question cannot be settled discursively; it must be inhabited existentially. This article has argued that McCarthy, Camus, and Saramago deploy narratives of collapse to expose the fragility of moral identity. They demonstrate that goodness is not a fixed attribute but a practice, a choice made in uncertainty. Sometimes

that choice appears clean; sometimes it bears stains. Yet it must be made. Inaction permits the beast to prevail; action risks becoming the beast. This risk defines the human condition.

The significance of this study lies in its challenge to reductive moral binaries. Literature often instructs readers to distinguish heroes from villains; these texts suggest such distinctions are luxuries afforded only by stability. Confronted with mortality, all are vulnerable, all capable of cruelty and care. The boundary between them is thin and shifts with circumstance. This does not entail moral relativism; it demands humility in judgment. We cannot assess the father without walking the road, the wife without entering the asylum, Rieux without facing the plague. This humility constitutes the ethical lesson: recognise our own fragility, acknowledge the possibility of failure, and prepare not for triumph but for endurance.

The theoretical frameworks of trauma, existentialism, and psychoanalysis substantiate this reading. They reveal the self as constituted through experience, not prior to it. Catastrophic experience fractures the subject; morality becomes a means of holding the pieces together. The fire, the revolt, the sight—these function not as truths but as tools, enabling survival amid fracture. They do not heal; they sustain. The scar remains. That scar matters: it reminds us of the cost and prevents forgetting. The father wishes the boy to forget the horror; the boy cannot. Rieux urges the city to remember the plague; the city forgets. The wife wishes the group to forget the killing; she remembers. Memory constitutes an ethical duty. To forget is to risk repetition; to remember is to learn. These texts demand memory. They demand that we recall the cost of survival and continue to ask the question.

The boy's question echoes beyond the page into our own historical moment. We live in an era of cascading crises—climate collapse, pandemics, political polarisation, economic inequality, and the erosion of democratic institutions—that threaten to destabilise the very structures these novels depict as fragile. The scenarios imagined by McCarthy, Camus, and Saramago are not merely fantastical thought experiments; they are extrapolations of tendencies already present in our world. When supply chains falter, when hospitals overflow, when communities fracture along lines of fear and scarcity, the question “Are we the good guys?” ceases to be a literary device and becomes an urgent ethical demand. The father's theft, Rieux's exhausted labour, the doctor's wife's violence—these are not distant possibilities but potential responses to crises we may face. The question these texts pose is not “What would fictional characters do?” but “What will we do when the structures we rely on fail?” The literary analysis offered here is not an exercise in historical or textual scholarship alone; it is a preparation for ethical reasoning under pressure. By inhabiting these narratives, readers rehearse the difficult choices that survival may demand. The question “Are we the good guys?” cannot be answered in advance; it can only be answered in the moment of crisis, through action. These texts do not provide answers; they provide the questions we must be prepared to ask. The fire is small. *The Plague* is vast. The blindness is deep. Yet we are here. We are alive. We are asking. That is enough. It must be. The road continues. The chronicle endures. Sight returns. We carry the fire. We carry the memory. We carry the question. And we walk.

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