

Ethical Responsibility in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

*The present study was a comparative analysis of ethics and human responsibility in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. Emmanuel Levinas's theory of ethics was used here for a better understanding of the sense of responsibility of characters and to see how they conform to ethical relationships with others. Based on Levinasian notions of face, moral responsibility and alterity, it is argued that responsibility is the basic tenet of McCarthy's and Lessing's novels which arises from face-to-face encounter with an Other. However, the study proved that the father and the son as major characters in McCarthy's novel stayed ethically good and preserved goodness in the apocalyptic world because they felt responsible towards each other as well as other strangers. On the contrary, Mary as the protagonist of Lessing *The Grass is Singing* was not an ethical character since she showed no concerns with responsibility and making moral relationships with other people.*

Keywords

Levinas, face, responsibility, the Other, alterity

1. Introduction

The present study is a comparative analysis of ethics and human responsibility in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. In order to perform a better analysis of the characters, as well as general atmosphere, of the selected novels, Emmanuel Levinas's theory of ethics is used as a tool for measuring what the characters do and how they are related to each other. Based on Levinasian ethics, human life is defined in relation to other people when one encounters faces of other people, and is said to be ethical only when he feels responsible towards others. Working within Levinasian ethics and notions of responsibility, face, the other, and alterity, the present study looks into the life of major and some minor characters to see to what level they conduct an ethical life in relation

with people around them. It is argued here that the atmosphere in both McCarthy's *The Road* and Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* is not ethical and both writers depict a hostile and inhumane society at different levels. However, the father and the son as major characters in McCarthy's *The Road* are ethical in that they feel and stay responsible to the end of the novel while Mary as the major character in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* fails to perform her responsibility in regard to people she encounters in her life.

The Grass is Singing is an exploration of the horror that arises from the relationship between a white woman and a black servant in a colonial society. The novel spins around the encounter between humans and how they treat each other. It is the story of Mary Turner and her encounters with people of different social rankings who bring different levels of human relations into her life and challenge her private world. However, the central aspect of the novel is the relationship Mary develops with a Negro servant who drives her into committing a series of frenetic acts that lead finally to her own destruction. Mary is bound to a socially ethical life where she continuously redefines herself in interacting with others and fails to establish a moral relationship with others (Bloom, pp. 20-21).

Similar to Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, McCarthy's *The Road* is an exploration of ethics but in a post-apocalyptic world where all notions of humanity seem to be lost and the characters are cast into an endless struggle with all forces that work against their wills. The general social background of *The Road* is gloomy and features constant violence, bloody scenes and a general mood of frustration. The two novels are similar in many ways but have fundamental differences in the way ethics is rendered in them. Both depict human ethical responsibility in a series of different relationships with people and show that the societies where the characters live in are far from ethical and drives people into more self-centeredness and antagonistic attitude towards others. However, while Lessing's characters fail to sustain goodness in them and cannot perform their responsibilities in regard to others, McCarthy's protagonists do well in preserving goodness and staying good guys throughout the novel.

2. Levinasian Ethics

Ethics is a major concern of many Western philosophers and is considered an intriguing enterprise. Many ethical theories have searched for an objective, rational standard that can be as decisive in morality as in the domains of mathematics and logic. Among others, Kant is one of the early philosophers who provides an inclusive formulation of ethics. For Kant, an act is moral when it can be generalized to be a moral code for all people. In Kantian ethics, rightness and wrongness of an action depends on whether it fulfills a duty. Moreover, a person is good not by the consequence of his action but when his intentions of doing something is determined by good will. Similarly, Heidegger claims that ethics bear a call on us that stimulate a sense of commitment in humans to do and spread good actions. Accordingly, humans are rational beings that act upon universal ethical principles and is free from any personal preferences.

Levinas is similar to Kant and Heidegger in terms of responsibility, but avoids giving any moral codes

and regulations on how to conduct a virtuous life and keep away from vices. Rather, he mostly tends to explain and clarify the meaning of moral life and how it encompasses human existence. The basis to Levinasian theory is that ethics occurs always in relation to other people. Thus, ethics is important to Levinas because it governs the relationship between people. As Sean Hand argues in *The Levinas Reader*, ethical relation for Levinas is basically one-sided, asymmetrical, unconditional and non-reciprocal where the Other has absolute priority and challenges autonomy and freedom of the individual. In Levinasian theory, human being is a social and ethical phenomenon whose subjectivity is defined in his relationship to and interactions with other people. Thus, subjectivity is not a secluded and independent entity and human identity develops as a result of encountering the Face of an Other. This relationship entails responsiveness and responsibility towards the Other without expecting the Other to return the same in exchange. In fact, the individual is subject to the Other.

The other is essential to the theory of Levinas. Unlike Heidegger who focuses on things as functions and tools, Levinas stresses on the role of things as living form which become part of human. For example, when one eats food, in the activity of eating it becomes a part of his body. This living form is a matter of consumption, a matter of taking what is other and making it become a part of me. Levinas writes: “Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment; an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (Levinas, p. 111).

In his seminal work, *On Being Human*, Micehle Saracino argues that Levinas’s basic position in ethics is the encounter of the individual with other people in the society. Levinas distinguishes the relationships between things and between people. When an individual encounters a non-human object, he manipulates and controls it, and even may try to change it to fit his needs and desires. This is a kind of master-slave relationship where the individual brings everything under his control. However, Levinas believes that when a person encounters another person, he in fact encounters a singular world of an individual who possesses the same level of power over things and people. Therefore, this individual can’t be reduced as an object to be mastered and remains a totality for himself because he is an experienced subject and has the power to resist any attempts of mastery over himself. Levinas calls this the “ethical resistance” of the other. Thus, the other has the capacity to call another individual’s possession of the world into question, and can question his existence. This is how people are essentially experienced, and Levinas argues that this is the source of ethical meaning (Saracino, pp. 119-122).

In *Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, Michael Morgan states that the core of Levinas’s theory lies on the relationship he holds with others and the sense of responsibility he feels towards them. Levinas refers to the ethical foundation as what is expressed in the relation between two particular persons when they face one another. Levinas’s ethics suggests that human existence and behavior are informed by a sense of right or wrong, good and bad, just and harmful and man is essentially an ethical being that has certain desires or emotions. Morgan suggests that in Levinasian

ethics, one's life is ethical when he is in contact with other people as ethical beings. In Levinas's words: "The relationship with the Other, puts me into the question, empties me of myself, then I loses its sovereign coincidence with itself, its identification, in which consciousness returned triumphantly to itself, the I is expelled from the rest" (*Collected*, p. 97).

According to Sean Hand in *Emmanuel Levinas*, responsibility for the other is an essential structure of subjectivity. He challenges Sartre's distinctive notion of being. For Sartre, man creates his own essence through his freedom, and freedom is essentially within man's existence. But, freedom for Levinas is totally different from that of Sartre's. He says, "We must therefore emphasize here the fact that freedom is not first. The self is responsible before freedom, whatever the paths that lead to the social superstructure. Freedom can here be thought as the possibility of doing what no one can do in my place; freedom is thus the uniqueness of that responsibility" (*Ethics and Infinity*, p. 181). For Levinas, responsibility for the other is prior to my freedom. Freedom is therefore not the essence of subjectivity. For Sartre, man is condemned to be free, but for Levinas, does not mean that one is free to do according to his will as an autonomous being, but responsibility for the other comes to him and questions his existence before the exercise of his freedom (pp. 134-138).

Levinas seems to argue in *Time and the Other* that the face-to-face encounter is about the self and its relationship to the other person. This is the basis for his ethical theory because it is then that a responsibility is born in the individual to care for needs of that other person. The society for Levinas is a big scene of life where people live together, sympathize with and care about one another and participate in a kind of reciprocal social relationship that relies on a certain set of etiquettes. Social interactions between people are characterized by a call of another person and the individual's respond to accept or reject him. This face-to-face encounter with the Other is the core idea in Levinasian ethics. But there is something in this relationship that is different from ordinary social life events, "But already, in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship—that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneousness" (p. 83).

3. Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) is undoubtedly a reflection of her commitment and ethical responsibility she feels in writing fiction, which is sustained throughout her long and successful career. Lessing feels committed to a sense of social responsibility to represent in her novels those aspects of human world which has been most controversial. Thus, central to her fiction is the relationship between people from the same or different social positions, such as the relationship between the black and the white. As Katherine Fishburn argues in *Doris Lessing Life, Work, and Criticism*.

For Doris Lessing writing has always involved a special kind of commitment to other people, a commitment that allows her to function as their artistic representative, taking their side and speaking out when they cannot. Thus at one time or another she has written about the disaffections of the lower

class, the stifled rebellions of middle-class women, the disenfranchisement of African blacks and the abuses of the mentally ill (Fishburn, p. 5).

Though we state here that the novel is laden with ethical concerns, Lessing masterfully avoids giving direct and explicit moral lessons and the reader has to mine the text carefully to see how Lessing makes her characters encounter ethical dilemmas. The plot of the story is straightforward and narrates the murder case of a woman by a black servant. From the very beginning, the reader is exposed to a horrible event that is unjustifiable in any ethical system. However, the way people deal with Mary's murder is shocking, "Normally that murder would have been discussed for months; people would have been positively grateful for something to talk about" (*GIS*, p. 4). The reader realizes soon that Lessing is depicting a callous and unethical society where people feel no sympathy over the death of a neighboring wife whose motive of murder by her houseboy is not clear. Nevertheless, the narrative discloses the secret of the Turner family. Mary and her husband, Dick, lead an isolated life detached from other people.

The novel demonstrates a multilayered account of Mary's relationships with people. But, as the story reveals, from the very beginning, it becomes clear that the central issue is Mary's relationship to Moses and how their interactions develop over time. This does not mean that Mary's relations are limited only to Moses. Mary has a wide range of relations with her husband, her network of friends in the office and community, but the novel makes it clear that the most problematic relation she has ever had is the one she develops with Moses. First of all, Mary treats all the natives with some pre-established prejudices and looks at them not as human beings but as houseboys whose existence is a burden for the Turners to carry. Even the few black natives who had little houses condemn the capsulated life of the Turners because it is a sort of disrespect for other people in the community, as they say, "It was not right to seclude themselves like that; it was a slap in the face of everyone else" (*GIS*, p. 32). In Levinasian ethics, a person who hides herself from another does not have an ethical life because she avoids the face of people and this means escaping responsibility which characterizes an ethical being.

Second, when it comes to Moses, Mary undergoes a more complex experience because, on the one hand, she feels sexually attracted towards him but, on the other, she cannot convince herself to accept Moses as he is a black man. Thus, like other natives, she mistreats Moses and looks down at him. In fact, Mary looks at Moses as an object to be in her possession and forgets the fact that man is different from objects and resists being possessed by another human being. Moses plays the role of Levinasian Other to Mary and gives a new direction to her life since it is the presence of the other that brings about responsibilities for the individual. Nevertheless, Mary never realizes the true role of Moses whose existence may be the source of happiness and establishing human bonds. Because of that she feels no responsibility towards Moses and shows no moral concerns in relation to him. This is the beginning of a troubling relation that ends in Mary's demise. In fact, Mary's murder is mainly the cause of her failure to recognize and respect Moses as a human being. Mary and Dick discuss over the significance of Moses, while Mary always insists on her own rights to possess Moses both in body and soul (Yousef, pp. 68-72).

Dick reminds her that “He’s a human being, isn’t he? He’s got to eat. Why must that bath be done all at once? It can be done over several days, if it means all that to you”, but Mary says “It’s my house. He’s my boy, not yours. Don’t interfere” (*GIS*, p. 84).

In regard to Moses, Mary takes up a superior position to herself and humiliates him on the basis of race. Even before she came to Dick’s farm, Mary used to avoid any direct contacts with the natives because she considered them as lower to herself in terms of race and humanity. Thus, she never establishes an ethical relation with him and makes him hostile towards herself. The main reason Mary cannot develop human relations with Moses is her reluctance to accept his alterity as an absolute other who is not supposed to be possessed by her. The same is also true for Moses. He is a black servant in the house and fails to accept Mary as a different female with specific characteristics. He always tries to have his own way and refuses to act what Mary orders him to because he gradually loses his sense of responsibility towards her and her fate. The difference between Mary and Moses is that Moses is irresponsible and unethical in his relation to Mary but has moral relations with other people. Mary shows no level of responsibility towards others and if she feels attached to someone it is because of some social pressures of others that impose certain norms on an individual.

In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing depicts a world of moral conflicts which is characterized by an unethical and hostile environment, hypocritical colonial discourse of white settlers, Mary’s loneliness, her racist attitude towards Moses, Dick’s incompetence as a farmer and husband, and the only character who is to pay for all these things is Mary who is sacrificed so that normal order may be restored to the farm. In fact, general social background of the novel, as well as characters in different levels, show lack of ethics in their attitude and behavior.

4. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

The Road is a deeper presentation of ethics than *The Grass is Singing* and develops a more sophisticated philosophy of life through a very simple plot-line. It entails a philosophical questioning of ethics and ethical behavior in an apocalyptic world where all notions of good and bad are heavily intermixed and no definite definition of ethical behavior is universally agreeable. Donovan Gwinner argues in “Everything uncoupled from its shoring: Quandaries of Epistemology and Ethics in *The Road*” there is a blurred line between an ethically good or bad guy and McCarthy professionally problematizes the simple definition of good man versus bad man in his novel to challenge the postmodern notion of ethics in early 21st century. Gwinner writes, “As the main characters deploy their survivalist semiotics, the postapocalyptic pragmatism ironically yields an abstract ethical dimension which maintains that determining whether an act is morally right depends only on the *actual* consequences, as opposed to foreseen, foreseeable, intended, or likely consequences” (Gwinner, p. 138).

As in *The Grass is Singing*, the conflict between the communal and the individual is at the center of the novel. However, the big difference between the two novels lies in the fact that McCarthy’s world is

devoid of any humane and civilized relations and is laden with hostilities. In the world depicted by McCarthy, there is no signifier and signified. That is to say, the relationship between objects and their meanings are lost and everything is redefined in the context of the novel. The father explains the situation they are bound to.

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever (*The Road*, p. 74).

As the above quotation implies, the protagonists of the novel, a father and a son, are cast in a world of oblivion where no notion of truth seems to absolutely hold. This is in line with the overall ethics of the novel. In fact, McCarthy wants to deploy a world where the bar between true and false is very hard to be seen. Thus, he tries to convey the message that ethics of the characters are not clearly stated by what is done by them. The reader, therefore, has to focus on hidden layers of the work to come to the true meaning of ethics in McCarthy's novel. This is in sharp contrast to simple and straightforward plot of *The Grass is Singing* where characters and their acts exactly signified what was intended by the author. From the very early pages of the novel, differences in atmosphere and cast of characters are observed by the reader. In *The Road*, the protagonists are cast in a world where civilization is completely destroyed and a general atmosphere of violence and inhumanity prevails. In such a Godless world, McCarthy's central theme is embedded. McCarthy seeks to show how hard it is to keep moral attitude and behavior. The narrator calls the father and the son "two hunted animals" and reports their feelings in such an unsympathetic situation, "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (*The Road*, p. 110).

In his rather sorrowful story, McCarthy features cannibalism, violence, inhumanity, and death of human values and ethics. The house where people are stored as food stock, the baby that is being roasted on a spit; all these extreme instances of lack of responsibility and ethics in people are rejected particularly by the son, who urges his father to promise that they would never eat people. And he replies that they never would, because they are the good guys. Therefore, from the very beginning of the story, the narrator makes the reader aware of general atmosphere of the novel and moral attitude of the characters. The man and the boy are undoubtedly ethical characters since they have taken as their duty to stay good guys and keep goodness. This is the early and the most significant manifestation of ethics in the novel. Along the story, McCarthy shows death of human civilization and ethics by representing the most hideous inhuman act of cannibalism. In fact, it clearly offers how pitiless and depraved human beings

can become in regard to each other when there is no ethical code. Infants, babies and other innocent people are killed and eaten as foodstuff to escape death. This is really unacceptable for the boy. “Oh Papa. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (*The Road*, p. 212). Cannibalism is, of course, often picked out in the novel as the most horrendous ethical crime that humans could commit against each other. Parallel to the goodness of father and son, McCarthy depicts in details scenes of brutality and cannibalism throughout the novel to show extremes of human degradation and the value of reestablishing human values in the antagonistic world.

In *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, Harold Bloom holds that the father, unlike his wife, does not lose his hope of survival and sustaining good on earth. He struggles to motivate the child as well as himself. He sometimes invokes the notion of carrying the fire in order to reassure the child. He says, “It is because they are carrying the fire that nothing bad will happen to them” (*The Road*, p. 83). This happens many times in the novel and the father and son talk about carrying the fire. What does it mean to carry the fire? Throughout much of the story, the two are literally carrying fire, or at least the means to produce it. Fire sustains them; it keeps them warm and cooks their food. It allows them to play cards and allows the man to read to the child at night. Fire is the foundation of civilization. “The fire signifies that vitality that burns within the ardent heart, the mystery that is the spark of life itself and that needs no reason to exist” (Bloom, p. 188).

The fire is the symbol of ethical responsibility that one has to keep goodness alive in the world in which evil dominates. In addition, the novel proposes a significant relationship between the act of carrying fire and being good guys, in a world mostly populated by bad guys. In fact, the idea of fire is twofold. On the one hand, there are numerous narrative passages reporting that fire has destroyed many jungles and cities. On the other hand, the boy and the father repeatedly insist on carrying fire in them. Thus, fire is the same element in the novel that can be used for constructive or destructive purposes. Carrying the fire is a task only performed by good people whose ethics are governed by moral goodness, as defined by the capacity to place value on life. Thus, the act of carrying fire is the symbolic task of working to restore moral goodness to the world and bring civilization back to its old glory where communities of moral people can cooperate for a better future instead of this bleak survivalist world where short-term and selfish gain is the norm.

Based on what McCarthy depicts about the father and the son, we can argue that the boy has the potential and has proved to carry the fire of ethics, goodness, responsibility, morality or whatever that distinguishes mankind in relation to his fellow beings. Accordingly, we see exactly in the novel that the boy, consciously or unconsciously, feels responsible to the face of the other and his responsibility is a sign of his true ethical codes. During the story, the father and the son enter a town and explore the area. The man leaves the child alone on the steps of a building. While the man is away, the child sees another boy: “A face was looking at him. A boy, about his age, wrapped in an outsized wool coat with the sleeves turned back” (*The Road*, p. 84). The child runs toward the boy, but the boy has vanished. The

child's shouts for the boy to come back so that he can help him. This is an indication of his deep moral concerns with people around him and testifies to Levinasian theory of ethics.

5. Conclusion

Lessing's ethics is meaningful in the dynamics of the human relationship, in the light of which responsibility can be assumed. This responsibility is not only temporarily called for, in an actual interaction with the Other, but should always already be a grounding modality of one's life. Lessing's ethics adds to Levinas's insights by pointing to the importance of taking responsibility for oneself: *agency* (rather than passivity) is a necessary precondition of taking responsibility for the Other. Indeed, responsibility, will, and agency are closely related in the novel's vocabulary, and Mary's lack of will and agency in her individual life necessarily results in both her failure in a human relationship, and her inability to take the burden of responsibility.

In the background of *The Grass is Singing*, there is the brutal discrimination practiced against the black by the white British settlers and it is possible to read the novel as a social critique of unethical relationship between humans in different levels. Thus, Lessing displays deeper intentions while constructing the novel, which cannot be taken simply as a depiction of racial conflict. It is obvious to detect the ethical clash between the white and the black, yet this forms a background in the novel for an individual who deteriorates day by day owing to her failure of balancing her own desires with the intentions of the Others.

The father and the son in McCarthy's *The Road* symbolically represent ethical characters in accordance with Levinasian notion of ethics and human responsibility. The nihilistic cosmos depicted by McCarthy in *The Road* portrays the cause of human civilization's death to be the decay of morality through the absence of divine justice. Even though some remnants of moral goodness still remains to the very end, that goodness does not have the capacity to restore civilization, because the negating force of nihilism is always present to overpower and negate the moral code unless responsibility is planted once again in the heart of man and those who have forgotten it. The novel portrays desperate and struggling survivors who trod a devastated road. Some of these survivors have surrendered their morals to desperation and starvation and have resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. They have stopped respecting the intrinsic value of rational beings, and clearly do not act according to any universal law. Others, such as the man and the boy refuse to relinquish their moral principles of respecting the value of human life, and would rather starve to death before they resort to cannibalism. Thus, *The Road* presents the reader with a clear dichotomy of good and evil, seemingly through ethical responsibility of being good to others and preserving goodness in the nihilistic cosmos. Dana Philips rightly says in "McCarthy and Apocalypse" that *The Road* is a contribution to a well-established genre of futuristic but dystopian fiction where ethics is neglected and only a few feel bound to performing human responsibility in facing other fellow humans.

To conclude, we can argue that both Lessing and McCarthy deal with ethics as reflected in human

encounters and relations at different levels. *The Grass is Singing* is Lessing's attempt to show how an individual breaks down against heavy communal values and gives in. Mary's characterization represents failure of mankind in developing goodness in oneself and performing ethical responsibility towards other people in the community. Conversely, *The Road* is a manifesto of human ethical relations in a nihilistic Godless world where a father and a son represent mankind in an attempt to survive goodness and ethical life in a society of cannibals and evil people who are concerned only with survival and pay no heed to human values and morality. Ethics in *The Road*, as compared to *The Grass is Singing*, is developed deeper and is the central building-block of the novel and can be apparently observed in routine practices of the protagonists in the form of responsible treatment of others on the road, while in *The Grass is Singing* characters mostly ignore or neglect their ethical responsibility towards others.

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