

### “Father and Son Relationships in Pulitzer Winners”

The father-son relationship exemplified by the man and the boy in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* exhibits more healthy traits, determined by psychological scholarship than the father-son relationship in *Tinkers* by Paul Harding. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents the story of a father and a son traveling across post-apocalyptic America. On the other hand, Paul Harding's *Tinkers* contains the story of an epileptic father, Howard, and his oldest son, George. Aspects such as the father's connection to his son, spending quality time together, and caring for the boy's needs, are indications of a healthy relationship in *The Road*. However, between Howard and George in *Tinkers* there is distance, silence, and abandonment. These traits, examined through a New Historicist lens, reveal how elements of the text are found in real life. New Historicism, defined by the University of Alabama as the study of anthropology and culture, dates back to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. New Historicism examines how characters' relationships are connected to what researchers are learning about relationships today. Exploration of the elements of the relationships in these two novels as well as information gathered from professionals answer the question: What kind of behaviors and models of practice does this work seem to reinforce? The answer helps readers to gain a better understanding of how the father-son dynamic in Pulitzer winning novels applies to real life relationships.

The first element that needs to exist in a healthy father-son relationship is a connection, or a basis upon which the relationship can be built. This connection could be a number of things: baseball, fishing, or even literature. These aid the father and son to join together, united in a common interest or activity. A strong father-son connection

endures life's trials and hardships. For example, the boy in *The Road* asks what would happen if he were to die. The father responds, "If you did I would want to die too" (9). Again, further on in the novel this devotion is still exemplified when the man says, "I wont leave you...I wont ever leave you" (93). These quotes display the man's devotion to his son showing that he would never leave him. The reader is unaware of why this connection between the two is so strong but can see how much the father cares about his boy.

The man's connection with his son contrasts to Howard in *Tinkers* who notices, "So there is my son, already fading" (120). Due to a lack of connection, Howard sees that George is distancing himself from Howard. A chasm exists between the two, resulting in a fragmented relationship with one another. There is nothing stated in the piece to indicate to the reader that the two had a basis to their relationship. There is no baseball, fishing, or literature to link them to each other. Howard spent the majority of his time out of the house due to his profession as a traveling tinker, which did not allow many opportunities to spend time with George. After an epileptic seizure in which Howard harms 12-year-old George, Howard abandons the family. Many years later Howard contacts George. George is living with his own family at the time and is shocked to see his father standing on his doorstep. Researchers, Fish, Long, Hanert, and Scheffler express that after an event of desertion, whether on the part of the father or the son, that, "There had been some attempt at reconciliation over the ensuing years, negative emotions were still very evident" (129). These researchers support Harding's depiction of George and Howard's situation. Although an attempt to reconnect was made, the hurt and pain of abandonment inside George remained. Even though Howard visited George 27 years

after the incident, it was not enough to repair the relationship that hardly existed before Howard left.

From these examples the reader learns the importance of establishing a connection in a father-son relationship. Some fathers and sons may struggle to establish common ground between them but the journey of finding suitable interests can be an experience that strengthens the relationship. However, the sooner this connection is established the more beneficial it is to the son because as stated by Scott E. Harper and Mark A. Fine, Department of Family Studies at Oklahoma Christian University and University of Missouri-Columbia, “a strong bond between a father and child can be of great importance during early and middle childhood” (305). The “bond” mentioned by Harper and Fine is the basis upon which a father and son construct their relationship. This bond is most important because it is the foundation for all other future connections to be built upon. Thus, we see that a connection or base for a relationship is needed in order to have ground upon which a relationship may grow. Without such a basis there is no tie between a father and son, which causes emotional scarring upon the child left behind.

A dynamic that contributes to the healthy father-son relationship in *The Road* is the amount of time spent together. The two travel together, watching and caring for each other. However, in between life threatening experiences, they still have time for common activities. For example, the boy asks his father, “You can read me a story...can’t you, Papa?” The man responds, “I can” (7). A caring nature is essential in a relationship between father and son. Reading a story qualifies as time spent with one another. Researchers from the Central Michigan University and Florida State University have found that, “The most common symbol of care referenced by men was time spent with

their fathers” (Fish et al 131). These researchers found, through interrogation of men, that when time was spent with their fathers, the men felt that their dad cared. The need to spend time with a father figure is essential because it allows for a relationship to form and once formed to strengthen and develop. This aspect of sharing time together was not a part of Howard and George’s relationship in *Tinkers*. Howard is very distant with his son, partly because of his profession, which kept him out of the house, and also because they had no relationship founded to begin with. When George is walking through the forest and finds a dead mouse, which he prepares to cremate, “Howard stood quietly and watched his son...at a distance” (78-9). Howard makes no attempt to converse with his son or aid in the cremation. Performing activities together are shown to have more impact than conversing, “The focus of the connection was activities done together, not lengthy emotional conversations” (Fish et al 131). Howard would not have had to carry on a conversation to participate with his son in the cremation. In the aspect of spending time together, there is a drastic contrast between the two father-son groups, which is valuable to readers. A simple activity such as reading a story had a positive effect on the boy but Howard does not perform any activities with George. Readers learn that the activity does not have to be extensive to be effective and positive in the life of sons. Therefore, spending time together is an important aspect in developing a strong father-son relationship because it strengthens the strong connection between the two, which *The Road* demonstrates with the father reading to his son, while those in *Tinkers* make no effort to be together and their relationship suffers because of it.

Once spending quality time becomes a common practice between a father and son, the father understands the emotional needs of the son more deeply. A father that

understands the needs and wants of his son has an easier process of fulfilling them. Eric D. Miller, a psychologist from Kent State University, reports, “Men may be seeking not only a closeness with their own fathers but...with their own sons which allows them to fulfill roles of guidance and care taking in the male tradition” (195). Miller expresses fathers have a desire to meet the needs of their sons by being a source of help and assistance, as exemplified in *The Road*. Whether running a bath, finding food, or being the source of protection, the man constantly meets the needs of the boy, demonstrating to the reader that the man fulfills his role as father and support. In contrast, Howard does little to provide for George. Besides working to provide food and other basic necessities for his family, Howard does not perform any other tasks to aid his family. Miller included the role of providing guidance in his statement. Howard passes on no guidance to George while the man repeatedly tells the boy, “You have to carry the fire” (234). The man instructs the boy that he needs to have hope and do what is right in the broken society in which they live where no notions of good and bad exist. The lack of guidance and care between Howard and George indicate a void between them. Jon A. Shaw, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at University of Miami, writes of a desire expressed by N.C. Wyeth stating, “I wished a hundred times that I could turn to some man who could understand my deepest thoughts, who would solemnly sympathize and heartily believe in my hopes and intentions” (189). This quote demonstrates the need a boy has to open up to someone who will understand and aid him. From these passages readers notice and learn that taking care of needs has an order of importance in the lives of sons. Food and other necessities are important, yet what a son needs most often, and will ask for least, is someone to speak to, confide in, and someone they can trust with their problems.

Rather than trying to buy a child's affection, if a father sits down with their son and listens, the relationship will be stronger and healthier. The boy in *The Road* had such a figure but George did not have anyone in his life that filled that role. Therefore, a father fulfills the role of caretaker not only by providing the means of survival but also as someone who can be trusted and confided in at the moments of difficulty in a son's life.

The relationship characteristics the man and the boy from *The Road* exemplify are healthier and lead to a stronger relationship than those seen in *Tinkers*. Psychological research indicates that establishing a common connection, spending time together, and caring for the needs of the son, especially the emotional needs, are essential between a father and a son. These characteristics are displayed by the man in *The Road* and ignored by Howard in *Tinkers* causing serious effects on the sons in the text. The boy has a caring father that he trusts and looks to while being respected and loved. However, George has a complete lack of a father figure as Howard fulfills none of these roles. The reader understands that these qualities do not only exist in the text but are applicable to real life family situations. Therefore, if the reader emulates the traits exemplified by the man in *The Road* in a family, the same positive effects occur with sons to create a stronger longer lasting relationship

## Works Cited

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