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Baptism by Blood

From just a splash to nearly drowning, literary characters often get soaked in all sorts of ways. Despite the varying methods and amounts of water, Foster suggests that many of these instances allude to the religious ritual of baptism in his book *How to Read Literature like a Professor*. Baptism is a symbolic act in which a new believer is submerged in water in order to indicate the death of his “old self” and being “born again” as a completely new person. Similar to undergoing a baptism, a character exposed to water is often “reborn” into a completely new life in literature. As an example, Foster mentions the scenario in Judith Guest’s *Ordinary People*, where twin brothers are caught in a storm and one drowns. Similar to one who has gone through a baptism, the surviving brother’s old identity as a younger brother dies in the storm and he returns to society as an only child. From then on, those around him never treat him the same way, resenting the loss of his older, more talented brother. Moreover, he himself struggles with his new status. Thus, Foster maintains that when a character is immersed in water and comes out alive, the author often desires to convey the idea of death, rebirth, and a new identity.

In *The Road*, McCarthy effectively alludes to this concept to emphasize the psychological permanence and irreversibility of the boy witnessing his father shoot a murder to save his life. Paralleling the physical aspect of a baptism, the boy is thoroughly drenched in the gore of the man who is about to kill him. Traditionally, water represents the washing away of sin in the baptism ceremony. In the boy’s gruesome version of a baptism, however, the blood symbolically washes away his innocence. McCarthy then describes the boy to have “no expression on his face at all” and as “mute as a stone” upon his father killing the murder and carrying him away (66). The boy’s corpselike demeanor suggests that despite being seemingly saved, he has been fatally struck spiritually. When the boy “revives” by speaking to his father out of necessity, the boy shows resilience to his father’s reassuring words and asks his father if they are truly the “good guys.” Moreover, the confrontation gives the boy a tangible experience of the barbarity of the remaining human race. The boy’s realization that his father is willing to kill others causes him to fear that they are the same as their savages they encounter. His resulting mistrust for his father’s words and his virtue cause tension between father and son. Although the boy is speaking and interacting with his father again, he is different-- he no longer acts in the obedient, unquestioning manner characteristic of the time prior to their encounter with the truck. From then on, the boy frequently inquires the man about whether they are “carrying the fire” throughout their journey. In the novel, fire is a symbol of hope and humanity. Therefore, the boy’s common inquiry reflects the great importance he places in them preserving the humanity left in this world and fear that he and his father are like the savages they encounter. Thus, similar to a baptism, the boy’s old, innocent self dies through his newfound knowledge of reality and he becomes psychologically reborn by the event, and the way he perceives his father and the world around him is forever changed, symbolically conveyed through his being soaked by the blood of the murder.