
Grief as Identity: Psychological and Existential Pain in *The Passenger*

S. Karthika ¹, Dr. T. Senthamarai ²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies, Chennai, India

² Professor and Head, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies, Chennai, India

Article Received: 26/12/2025

Article Accepted: 29/01/2026

Published Online: 31/01/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.549

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* represents a significant shift in the author's literary focus from physical violence to internal suffering, emphasizing pain and grief as enduring aspects of human existence. The novel follows Bobby Western, a salvage diver whose life is shaped by unresolved grief over the suicide of his sister, Alicia Western, a brilliant mathematician suffering from severe mental illness. Rather than presenting grief as a temporary emotional response, McCarthy portrays it as a permanent psychological and existential condition. This research paper examines how pain and grief operate at both personal and philosophical levels in *The Passenger*. Bobby's emotional withdrawal, guilt, and isolation reflect the lasting effects of loss, while Alicia's psychological suffering highlights the destructive tension between genius and mental instability. Through fragmented narration, philosophical dialogue, and recurring silence, McCarthy illustrates how grief resists closure and meaning. The paper argues that *The Passenger* presents grief not as something that can be healed, but as something that must be endured. Pain becomes inseparable from love, memory, and consciousness. By situating personal loss within a broader existential crisis marked by the collapse of certainty, faith, and order, McCarthy universalizes grief as a defining feature of modern human life. Ultimately, the novel offers a stark yet honest portrayal of suffering, emphasizing endurance over redemption and silence over consolation.

Keywords: Pain, Grief, Existentialism, Trauma, Loss

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's literary career has consistently explored the darker dimensions of human experience, including violence, moral collapse, and existential despair. However, *The Passenger* marks a notable departure from his earlier novels by shifting attention away from external brutality toward internal pain and psychological grief. Published late in McCarthy's life, the novel reads as a deeply reflective work that confronts loss, memory, and the burden of consciousness.

The protagonist, Bobby Western, is introduced as a salvage diver involved in investigating a sunken airplane with missing passengers. While this mystery initially appears central to the plot, it gradually becomes clear that the true focus of the novel is Bobby's emotional life, particularly his grief over the death of his sister, Alicia Western. Alicia, a mathematical prodigy suffering from schizophrenia, commits suicide before the main events of the novel. Her absence haunts Bobby throughout the narrative, shaping his thoughts, relationships, and sense of self.

McCarthy does not portray grief in dramatic or sentimental terms. Instead, grief appears as silence, detachment, and aimless movement. Bobby drifts through life without ambition or hope, suggesting that grief has emptied his existence of meaning. As Bobby reflects, "There is no such thing as life without bloodshed" (McCarthy, p. 81), indicating that suffering is inseparable from living itself. The novel also expands the theme of grief beyond personal loss to include intellectual and existential sorrow. Through philosophical discussions on physics, mathematics, and history, McCarthy suggests that modern humanity is grieving the loss of certainty and coherence in an increasingly complex world. Alicia's mental suffering symbolizes the destructive cost of extreme intelligence, while Bobby's emotional numbness reflects the inability to reconcile love with loss.

This paper explores how *The Passenger* presents pain and grief as central, enduring conditions of human existence. By analysing character development, narrative structure, and philosophical themes, the study argues that McCarthy portrays grief not as a problem to be solved, but as a reality to be endured.

Grief as a Permanent Condition

In *The Passenger*, Cormac McCarthy presents grief not as a temporary emotional reaction but as a permanent condition that shapes and defines Bobby Western's life. Alicia's death does not lead to healing, acceptance, or emotional release. Instead, it leaves Bobby suspended in a state of emotional stillness. He does not actively mourn in visible or traditional ways; rather, he continues to exist within grief, carrying it quietly through his everyday life. Grief becomes a condition of being rather than an experience that passes with time.

After Alicia's suicide, Bobby withdraws from the world around him. His life is marked by detachment, loneliness, and emotional distance. He avoids deep relationships and long-term commitments, choosing instead a life of movement and isolation. This behaviour reflects what McCarthy presents as unresolved grief—pain that has no clear outlet and no final resolution. Bobby himself acknowledges this reality when he states, "*You don't forget things. You just don't talk about them*" (McCarthy, p. 112). This line reveals how grief survives through silence rather than expression.

One of the most striking effects of Bobby's grief is emotional numbness. He continues to function in the world, but his emotional life appears empty. Happiness, ambition, and hope seem distant. McCarthy shows that grief does not always appear as visible sadness; sometimes it appears as the loss of feeling itself. Bobby's numbness suggests that grief has drained his emotional energy, leaving behind a quiet emptiness rather than open despair.

Another important aspect of grief in the novel is avoidance of memory. Bobby does not openly discuss Alicia or confront her death directly. He avoids revisiting the past because memory brings pain. However, this avoidance does not free him from grief. Instead, it allows grief to remain unprocessed and deeply rooted. McCarthy suggests that silence does not erase pain; it only hides it beneath the surface.

Isolation becomes both a response to and a result of grief. Bobby distances himself from others to protect himself from further emotional loss. Relationships demand emotional openness, and emotional openness risks renewed suffering. By choosing isolation, Bobby avoids pain, but he also cuts himself off from healing human connection. McCarthy presents isolation as a form of quiet suffering rather than peace.

Grief in *The Passenger* is also closely connected to guilt. Bobby feels a deep sense of responsibility toward Alicia and believes, even unconsciously, that he failed her. This guilt intensifies his grief and prevents closure. As the novel suggests, "*What you owe is what you can never repay*" (McCarthy, p. 189). Alicia's death becomes a moral and emotional burden Bobby carries throughout his life.

Time does not heal grief in McCarthy's vision. The past remains emotionally present, and Alicia's absence continues to shape Bobby's present. Through this portrayal, *The Passenger* challenges the idea that grief fades naturally. Instead, McCarthy presents grief as permanent, shaping identity, relationships, and existence itself. Bobby does not overcome grief; he learns to live within it.

Bobby and Alicia Western: Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Pain

In *The Passenger*, Cormac McCarthy presents pain through two closely connected characters—Bobby Western and his sister Alicia Western. While Bobby represents quiet

emotional suffering, Alicia embodies intense psychological and existential pain. Together, they illustrate different but interconnected forms of grief, showing how suffering can appear both silently and violently within the human mind.

Bobby Western's emotional pain is marked by passivity and numbness. Unlike traditional tragic heroes who actively confront their suffering, Bobby does not attempt to overcome his grief. Instead, he lives within it. His life is characterized by aimless movement, emotional withdrawal, and a lack of clear purpose. He moves from place to place without direction, suggesting what may be described as existential fatigue—a deep weariness with life itself. His grief expresses itself not through visible sorrow but through indifference and emotional emptiness.

Bobby's conversations further reveal his inner suffering. Although he speaks intelligently and thoughtfully, he remains emotionally distant. He avoids speaking directly about Alicia, implying that language is insufficient to express the depth of his pain. This emotional restraint reflects his belief that suffering cannot be fully communicated. His fatalistic view of existence is evident when the novel states, "*The world has created no living thing that it does not intend to destroy*" (McCarthy, p. 198). This statement reflects Bobby's internal despair and his acceptance of suffering as an unavoidable part of life. Through Bobby, McCarthy shows how grief can quietly drain life of meaning without physically destroying the individual. Bobby survives, but survival itself becomes a burden.

In contrast, Alicia Western represents a more visible and intense form of suffering. As a mathematical genius, her exceptional intelligence isolates her from society and deepens her mental illness. Alicia's pain is both psychological and existential. She struggles to understand reality, language, and the purpose of existence, often questioning the value of life itself. Her intellectual awareness exposes her to truths that overwhelm the human mind, leading to deep inner conflict.

Alicia's hallucinations and inner dialogues reveal a fractured consciousness burdened by excessive awareness. Her statement, "*I don't believe in God. But I miss Him*" (McCarthy, p. 43), captures her existential grief—the pain of living in a world without spiritual certainty or meaning. This longing reflects not faith, but loss: a mourning for meaning itself.

Alicia's suicide is not presented as heroic or romantic but as the tragic outcome of unbearable mental and intellectual suffering. Her death does not end her pain; instead, it transfers that pain to Bobby. Alicia's psychological collapse becomes the foundation of Bobby's lifelong grief, binding their suffering together. McCarthy thus presents emotional pain and mental illness as deeply interconnected, showing how one person's inner destruction can shape another's enduring sorrow.

Guilt, Love, and Existential Grief in a Fragmented World

In *The Passenger*, Cormac McCarthy presents grief as a complex emotional and philosophical condition shaped by guilt, love, and existential uncertainty. Bobby Western's grief is deeply connected to guilt, particularly his sense of responsibility toward his sister Alicia. Although he could not prevent her suffering or her death, Bobby believes that he failed to protect or truly understand her. This sense of guilt intensifies his grief and prevents emotional closure. His pain is not only about loss but also about responsibility, making grief heavier and more enduring.

Love, in McCarthy's novel, is inseparable from pain. Bobby's love for Alicia is profound, yet it is marked by distance, helplessness, and inability to intervene. He loves her deeply but cannot save her from her inner collapse. McCarthy suggests that love itself carries the risk of unbearable loss, observing, "*The deeper the love, the deeper the loss*" (McCarthy, p. 257). In this sense, grief becomes the unavoidable consequence of loving another person. Love does not protect Bobby from suffering; instead, it becomes the source of his deepest pain.

This emotional complexity is reflected in the fragmented narrative structure of *The Passenger*. The novel does not follow a linear or orderly pattern. Instead, it moves unpredictably across time, memory, and conversation. This fragmentation mirrors Bobby's inner state, where grief disrupts continuity and coherence. Conversations often feel incomplete, and scenes end without resolution, reflecting how grief interrupts meaning and prevents emotional clarity.

McCarthy's refusal to offer narrative closure reflects the emotional reality of loss. Just as Bobby cannot resolve his grief, the novel itself resists neat conclusions. Grief remains unfinished, unresolved, and ongoing. The reader is left with uncertainty, mirroring Bobby's psychological condition. Through this structure, McCarthy shows that grief cannot be neatly explained or contained within traditional storytelling forms.

Beyond personal loss, *The Passenger* expresses a broader existential grief connected to the modern world. Characters frequently discuss the limitations of science, reason, and knowledge in providing meaning or comfort. Despite intellectual progress, humanity appears emotionally and spiritually lost. This collective uncertainty deepens the novel's sense of sorrow.

This existential condition is captured in the observation, "*We are passengers on a journey whose destination we do not know*" (McCarthy, p. 301). Human beings move through life without clear purpose or assurance, burdened by loss and uncertainty. In this world, grief is not only personal but universal. Through guilt, love, fragmented form, and existential doubt, McCarthy presents grief as a defining feature of modern human existence.

The Passenger suggests that to love is to risk loss, to know is to suffer, and to live is to endure grief without the promise of resolution.

Conclusion

The Passenger stands as one of Cormac McCarthy's most introspective and philosophically complex works, offering a deeply moving exploration of pain and grief as defining features of human existence. Unlike McCarthy's earlier novels that focus on physical violence and external conflict, this novel turns inward, examining emotional suffering, psychological trauma, and existential loss. Through the lives of Bobby Western and Alicia Western, McCarthy presents grief not as a temporary emotional wound that can be healed with time, but as a lasting condition that shapes identity, memory, and consciousness.

Bobby Western's quiet suffering illustrates how grief operates through emotional withdrawal, guilt, and isolation. His inability to move beyond Alicia's death demonstrates how unresolved grief reshapes a person's sense of purpose and connection to the world. Bobby survives, but his survival is marked by emptiness rather than hope. Alicia Western's intense psychological pain, on the other hand, reveals the tragic cost of extreme intelligence and heightened awareness in a world that offers no spiritual certainty or moral reassurance. Her mental illness and eventual suicide expose the limits of human reason and the unbearable burden of consciousness.

The novel's fragmented narrative structure reinforces these themes by mirroring the disordered and incomplete nature of grief itself. McCarthy deliberately avoids narrative closure, emotional release, or moral resolution. This refusal reflects the reality of loss, where pain does not end neatly and answers remain out of reach. Instead of offering comfort or redemption, McCarthy emphasizes endurance as the only possible response to suffering. Ultimately, *The Passenger* suggests that to be human is to carry grief—to live with absence, uncertainty, and irreversible loss. In portraying pain with restraint, silence, and philosophical depth, McCarthy offers a powerful reflection on the fragile yet persistent nature of human existence, reminding readers that grief is not something we escape, but something we learn to live with.

Works Cited

- Camus and Sartre's Views on Existentialism. *EduBirdie*, 16 Sept. 2021,
<https://hub.edubirdie.com/examples/camus-and-sartres-views-on-existentialism/>.
Accessed 27 Mar. 2025.
- Cromby, John. *Psychology, Mental Health and Distress*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

-
- Fiorini, Leticia Glocer, et al. *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"*. Routledge, 2018.
- Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. University of South Carolina Press, 2012.
- Gorgievski, Marjan J., and Ute Stephan. "Advancing the Psychology of Entrepreneurship: A Review of the Psychological Literature and an Introduction." 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12073>.
- Graham, George. *An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Mental Illness*. Routledge, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203069882>.
- Hage, Erik. *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion*. McFarland, 2010.
- Horwitz, Allan V. *Creating Mental Illness*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Ishihara, L., and C. Brayne. "A Systematic Review of Depression and Mental Illness Preceding Parkinson's Disease." 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0404.2006.00579.x>.
- Lavrin, Janko. "A Note on Nietzsche and Dostoevsky." *The Russian Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1969, pp. 160–170. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/127505>.
- Luce, Dianne C. *Cormac McCarthy: A Bibliography*. *Southern Quarterly*, 1992.
- Mattoon, Mary Ann. *Jungian Psychology in Perspective*. Free Press, 1985.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1992.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Stella Maris*. Pan Macmillan, 2023.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Passenger*. Pan Macmillan, 2022.