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Psychic Fracture and the Limits of Reality: Existentialism, Trauma, and Phenomenology in McCarthy's *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*

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ABSTRACT: Cormac McCarthy's companion novels, *The Passenger* (2022) and *Stella Maris* (2022), represent a profound late-career turn from externalized physical violence to interiorized psychological, existential, and phenomenological trauma. Through a qualitative, interdisciplinary close reading informed by Sartre and Camus's existentialism, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, this study analyzes how Bobby Western and Alicia Western's psychological fractures operate not merely as clinical psychopathology, but as a fundamental crisis of reality, identity, memory, and epistemological certainty. Bobby's grieving, paralyzing guilt, and self-imposed isolation embody the latent, repetitive temporality of trauma, while Alicia's schizophrenia, hallucinatory encounters (notably the Thalidomide Kid), and mathematical skepticism interrogate the validity of human perception and secular epistemology. The Western siblings' shared grief and emotional entanglement transform memory from an archival record into a volatile, generative space of shared suffering. By examining how the inherited legacy of the Manhattan Project interiorizes technological violence into psychic dread, the study demonstrates that McCarthy positions human consciousness at the precipice of the unknowable. Ultimately, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* assert that while reality remains incomplete, unstable, and impervious to absolute closure, the human struggle for meaning endures precisely within the encounter with existential uncertainty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy's fiction occupies an indelible, distinct position in contemporary American literature, distinguished by its long-term concern with violence, mortality, moral ambiguity, ontological isolation, and the relentless quest for human meaning [1]. From the harrowing historical bloodletting of *Blood Meridian* (1985) to the post-apocalyptic, ash-covered ethical wasteland of *The Road* (2006), McCarthy's protagonists are consistently cast into radical environments where conventional moral, philosophical, and epistemological frameworks are rendered tenuous [2]. Critics have long read his fiction as both historical narrative and metaphysical inquiry, as well as formal experimentation facilitated by his distinctive prose style—characterized by syntactic compression, sparse punctuation, biblical cadence, and an intense materiality and spatial precision [3, 4].

However, McCarthy's final literary contributions—the interconnected novels *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, published in 2022—signal a monumental evolution in his aesthetic vision. Rather than continuing the depiction of physical and territorial brutality,

these twin texts execute an 'inward turn,' transposing violence into the elusive contours of consciousness, perception, memory, and the individual's struggle to make sense of an unconcerned universe. The Passenger follows Bobby Western, a salvage diver and former physicist haunted by loss, secrecy, displacement, and the mysterious disappearance of a passenger from a sunken aircraft. Conversely, Stella Maris adopts a strictly dialogic form, chronicling the interior monologue and psychiatric consultations of Alicia Western, Bobby's sister, who explores the nature of mathematics, hallucination, grief, and psychological disturbance, systematically undermining the boundaries between reason and irrationality, perception and reality [5].

The two novels are thus structurally distinct yet intimately connected: Bobby's narrative revolves around physical movement, memory, investigation, and spatial isolation; Alicia's centers on philosophical reflection, mathematical speculation, and an increasingly tenuous relation to the perceived world. Together, they offer an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the direction of McCarthy's ongoing exploration of existential crisis. While existing scholarship on McCarthy has extensively analyzed violence in *Blood Meridian* and morality, filial love, and survival in *The Road*, an emerging body of criticism on *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* has increasingly addressed psychological interiority, gender, mental illness, and the formal connections between the two texts [6, 7].

Recent critical literature discusses the philosophical density of Alicia's discourse, the psychological depth of McCarthy's late fiction, and his portrayal of schizophrenia [8, 9, 10]. These studies highlight the depth of McCarthy's late novels, but they also expose a persistent interpretative challenge: how does the psychological disorientation, existential questioning, trauma, and perceptual confusion fit into the context of the author's earlier preoccupation with violence? This study resolves that problem by demonstrating that *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* do not breach McCarthy's earlier aesthetics of violence, but rather interiorize it. Violence in his previous fiction is bodily, geographical, historical, and interpersonal; in his final duology, its effects reside within consciousness itself. Grief, guilt, traumatic memory, isolation, psychological fragmentation, and epistemological uncertainty become the primary realms of conflict. This shift from external violence to subjective perception allows McCarthy to deepen his philosophical preoccupations while fundamentally transforming the formal and psychological modes through which they are expressed.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

To rigorously examine the psychological and philosophical dimensions of Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, this study adopts an integrated tripartite theoretical framework comprising Existentialism, Trauma Theory, and Phenomenological Approaches to Perception, paired with a qualitative close-reading methodology.

2.1 Existentialism: Absurdity, Isolation, and the Quest for Meaning

Existentialism emphasizes the lived conditions of human existence, freedom, death, solitude, anxiety, and the quest for meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre links existence to radical freedom, responsibility, and the unavoidable challenge of self-determination in a contingent world [11]. Albert Camus defines the 'Absurd' as the insurmountable friction between humanity's innate longing for purpose and the uncaring silence of the universe [12]. This perspective provides an essential lens for analyzing Bobby and Alicia Western: Bobby must negotiate crushing grief, guilt, isolation, and the absence of his sister, while Alicia explores the nature of existence, death, reality, and the limits of human knowledge. Both characters highlight the acute difficulty of discovering steadfast meaning in suffering and loss, framing the duology in terms of solitude, absurdity, and existential longing.

2.2 Trauma Theory: Unclaimed Experience, Latency, and Memory

Trauma theory examines the psychological impacts of catastrophic events in relation to memory, identity, and consciousness. Cathy Caruth observes that traumatic experience is characterized by latency: it is not fully understood or cognitively integrated at the moment of occurrence, but returns repeatedly through intrusive memories, flashbacks, silences, and emotional turbulence [13]. Dominick LaCapra differentiates between 'acting out' (in which the subject remains trapped in the cyclical, unintegrated repetition of trauma) and 'working through' (the process of acquiring critical distance and mourning) [14]. In McCarthy's fiction, Alicia's death exerts an ongoing psychological impact on Bobby's life, while Alicia's own distress is bound to family history, memory, and her worldview. Trauma theory thus illuminates the persistence of loss, guilt, absence, and psychological fragmentation across the two texts.

2.3 Phenomenology and Perception: Embodiment and Lived Experience

Phenomenology investigates lived experience and the structures through which consciousness encounters the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the embodied nature of perception, arguing that perceiving is not a passive reception of objective external stimuli, but an active, relational engagement between consciousness, the body, and the world [15]. This framework is vital for evaluating Alicia's experiences in *Stella Maris*, where the distinction between hallucination and objective reality is destabilized. Bobby likewise experiences reality through the prism of grief, memory, and personal displacement. Phenomenology allows this study to investigate how the novels question whether reality can ever be fully comprehended through rational or sensory means.

2.4 Interconnected Tripartite Synthesis

These three theoretical approaches are mutually reinforcing: Existentialism accounts for the characters' struggle with mortality, isolation, and purpose; Trauma Theory explains the ongoing persistence of loss and guilt through memory; and Phenomenology explains how these disruptions affect the constitution of consciousness and perception. Together, they substantiate the concept of 'interiorized violence': violence moves from an external physical event into memory and identity, altering perception. Fragmented memories, uncertain perceptions, and shifting realities mirror the instability of consciousness, confirming that McCarthy probes the ways in which violence persists within memory, perception, and existential ambiguity.

2.5 Qualitative Textual Methodology

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, close reading of *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, supported by comparative references to McCarthy's wider literary canon. Special analytical focus is placed on thematic clusters of grief, guilt, isolation, hallucination, memory, violence, perception, and existential uncertainty. The analysis accounts for the formal distinctions between the texts: *The Passenger*'s narrative movement, physical spaces, and investigative plot contrast with *Stella Maris*'s extended dialogic format, enabling a comprehensive assessment of how narrative form constructs consciousness while acknowledging the interpretive nature of literary analysis.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The publication of *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* in 2022 generated widespread critical engagement across psychological, philosophical, existential, and epistemological domains. Critics increasingly treat the two works as companion texts rather than a novel and sequel, examining Alicia Western's psychological condition, Bobby Western's isolation, sibling entanglement, death, and the limits of knowledge [6, 7, 8].

In 'Drowning and Dreaming: Navigating Mental Illness in McCarthy's Twin Novels,' Katharine Lynda and T. Senthamarai examine the portrayal of mental illness, hallucinations, and distorted perception in the characters of Bobby and Alicia, connecting their suffering to loss and psychological pain [16]. The present study extends their inquiry by systematically linking psychological suffering with trauma theory, existential isolation, and the phenomenological problem of reality.

In 'Meaninglessness, Indifference, Suicide, and Incest: The Philosophical Pessimism of Cormac McCarthy's *Stella Maris*,' Jonathan Elmore and Rick Elmore provide a thorough philosophical analysis, demonstrating that Alicia's philosophy of universal indifference and meaninglessness constitutes a coherent critique of Western culture [10]. They connect Alicia's meditations on mathematics, language, and suicide to existential dilemmas. This study builds upon their findings by examining the lived psychological experience of philosophical pessimism and its relation to trauma and perception.

Marcel DeCoste's chapter, 'Warrior or Penitent?: Resolving the Western Dilemma in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*,' situates the novels within McCarthy's broader intellectual engagement with science, uncertainty, and Western intellectual traditions [17]. The current study extends DeCoste's insights by drawing a direct connection between epistemological uncertainty and the psychological interiority of the characters.

In 'Companionship, Material Possessions, and the Void in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*,' Jordan J. Dominy analyzes how Bobby and Alicia cope with existential void and sibling loss, emphasizing the emptiness following severed human connection [19]. This study develops Dominy's thesis by reading the sibling relationship as an interconnected psychological structure bound by shared history and trauma.

Oliver Haslam's "At the Edge of the Intactile Dark": Gothic Minimalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* examines the atmosphere of darkness, uncertainty, and unsettling minimalism in the novels [18]. Haslam's emphasis on the liminal space between visible and invisible, real and imagined, informs this study's analysis of psychological discomfort.

Further scholarly context is provided by M. Johnson's doctoral research on precarious meaning and nothingness in McCarthy [22], J. Kesman's study of darkness and sibling dynamics in *Outer Dark* [23], and G. M. Jones's dissertation on the ongoing aftermaths of historical violence [24]. While emerging scholarship has examined mental illness, philosophical pessimism, sibling bonds, and epistemological uncertainty individually, few studies integrate these dimensions into a cohesive tripartite framework. This paper bridges that gap by investigating the causal chain connecting trauma, memory, perception, and existential crisis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Psychological suffering is central to human existence in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. Both novels chronicle Bobby and Alicia Western, whose lives are shaped by loss, guilt, memory, isolation, and uncertainty. *The Passenger* traces Bobby's physical and emotional trajectory through bereavement, while *Stella Maris* explores Alicia's consciousness through her clinical dialogues with Dr. Cohen. The novels offer complementary vantage points on a shared psychological universe: one navigates external space, the other internal awareness.

4.1 Bobby Western: Trauma, Guilt, and Existential Isolation

Bobby Western lives in the permanent aftermath of loss. Alicia's suicide is not a past occurrence but the structuring principle of his existence. His grief is not a transient emotional reaction; it becomes a constant condition of being. Bobby navigates a world devoid of stable social anchorage, and his profession as a salvage diver immerses him in darkness, death, and submerged objects—a physical manifestation of his psychological mindset. He repeatedly encounters scenes and memories of his former life, demonstrating that his past remains active in the present.

This condition aligns with Caruth's trauma theory, which holds that traumatic experiences return through delayed memory and repetition [13]. Bobby's experience demonstrates that loss perpetually haunts the survivor. Grief is inextricably bound to guilt: he is painfully conscious that Alicia is dead while he survives, making survival itself agonizing. In his conversation with Detective Kline, Bobby defines himself as 'a man that has let down those who have looked to him' [5, p. 112]. His loss is compounded by self-condemnation, merging bereavement with accountability and turning his suffering into an existential crisis of identity and purpose [19].

4.2 Alicia Western: Psychological Fracture and the Crisis of Reality

Alicia Western embodies a complementary form of psychic anguish. *Stella Maris* presents her through dialogues with Dr. Cohen, highlighting her extraordinary mathematical intellect alongside vivid hallucinations, most notably the Thalidomide Kid. McCarthy avoids resolving whether the Kid is a psychological projection, an objective entity, or a liminal hallucination, leaving the reader in productive ambiguity. Alicia's dialogues range across mathematics, metaphysics, dreams, religion, and death, linking her psychological fracture to an epistemological crisis.

Rather than pathologizing Alicia, the novel presents her condition as an inquiry into the limits of human knowledge [8]. She questions whether sensory perception provides genuine access to reality, asserting that perception is an evolutionary construct rather than a direct mirror of truth [5, p. 84]. Her hallucinations challenge the foundation of empiricism, causing her to suffer both psychologically and philosophically.

4.3 Memory, Loss, and the Persistence of the Past

Memory serves as the vital connective tissue between the two novels. Bobby and Alicia remain bound to a past that actively structures their present. Bobby's recollections of Alicia—evoked through places, objects, and conversations—preserve her presence while perpetuating his grief. Memory thus performs a dual function: it sustains emotional connection while extending traumatic suffering, matching Caruth and LaCapra's models of traumatic repetition [13, 14].

In *Stella Maris*, Alicia's memories of childhood, parents, mathematics, and Bobby are presented fragmentarily during therapy. This non-linear movement reflects the volatile nature of psychological memory. As Michael Gorra observes, the two novels construct



a 'family history assembled out of fragments' that illuminate each other [18]. The fractured narrative structure mirrors the disjointedness of memory itself, preventing Bobby from fully accepting Alicia's absence and keeping Alicia psychologically bound to her brother [9].

4.4 The Sibling Bond: Love, Guilt, and Shared Suffering

The relationship between Bobby and Alicia represents the emotional epicenter of both novels. Marked by deep affection, intellectual intimacy, guilt, and loss, their bond exceeds conventional sibling dynamics. Bobby's life is defined by the absence of the one person who truly understood him, while Alicia battles mental illness while remaining emotionally tethered to Bobby [9, 20].

Stacey Peebles characterizes the siblings as an 'entangled' dyad whose psychological experiences are mutually dependent [9]. Their separation transforms into profound existential loneliness: Bobby is spiritually widowed by Alicia's death, while Alicia suffers psychological isolation. Their connection becomes a space through which trauma is transmitted and retained across time.

4.5 Interiorized Violence: The Manhattan Project and Technological Dread

While violence is a defining theme across McCarthy's oeuvre, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* mark its transition into psychological interiority. Physical violence, war, and social decay are present, but their most potent manifestations occur within memory and consciousness. Bobby and Alicia are burdened by their family history: their father's participation in the Manhattan Project links modern scientific destruction directly to their psychological inheritance [5, 21].

Personal suffering is thus embedded in the larger narrative of technological catastrophe. Violence does not conclude when the physical act ends; it persists in guilt, grief, and perceptual disturbance [18]. This internalization of violence is central to McCarthy's late philosophy of the human condition.

4.6 Reality, Perception, and the Epistemological Limits of Knowledge

Both novels challenge the stability of objective reality. The world is depicted as ephemeral and imperfect, inaccessible through uncritical sensory perception or pure rationale. Despite their scientific and mathematical sophistication, neither Bobby nor Alicia can attain absolute certainty. Bobby's knowledge of quantum physics leads him to confront 'the indeterminacy of reality itself' [5, p. 147], shifting his crisis from physics to metaphysics [21].

In *The Passenger*, the mystery of the missing plane passenger dissolves into an 'epistemological mystery,' as Dianne C. Luce argues [17]. Similarly, in *Stella Maris*, Alicia's mathematical expertise reveals that formal axiomatic systems cannot resolve existential questions [7, 10]. Alicia's declaration that 'the world itself is a horror' [5, p. 108] and her observation that physical reality is finite [5, p. 120] equate material limitation with human mortality [20]. Reason does not eliminate uncertainty; it deepens it, requiring the reader to participate in the open-ended search for meaning.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Psychological, Existential, and Phenomenological Dimensions in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*

Analytical Dimension	The Passenger (Bobby Western)	Stella Maris (Alicia Western)
Narrative Mode & Space	External odyssey; salvage diving, New Orleans, Spanish coast; physical drift	Stationary psychiatric dialogue; Black River Falls institution; pure interiority
Psychological Condition	Complicated bereavement, survivor's guilt, traumatic latency, melancholic withdrawal	Paranoid schizophrenia, visual/auditory hallucinations, intellectual hyper-lucidity
Existential Stance	Absurdist endurance; living in the shadow of loss; searching for meaning in absence	Philosophical pessimism; deconstruction of secular reason; voluntary suicidal closure



Phenomenological Manifestation	Physical voids, underwater wreckage, spectral memories, tactile encounters with death	Hallucinatory entities (Thalidomide Kid), sensory skepticism, critique of perception
Relation to Violence	Inherited historical guilt (Manhattan Project); physical exposure to death & surveillance	Interiorized technological dread; intellectualization of nuclear annihilation
Epistemological Resolution	Unresolved detective plot (missing passenger); acceptance of cosmic mystery	Incompleteness of mathematics; recognition of the absolute limits of human reason

Table 2. Tripartite Theoretical Synthesis and Textual Correlates in McCarthy's Duology

Theoretical Framework	Key Theoretical Tenets	Manifestation in The Passenger & Stella Maris
Existentialism (Sartre, Camus)	Absurdity of cosmic silence; radical freedom; ontological isolation; crisis of meaning	Bobby's search for purpose post-bereavement; Alicia's recognition of universal indifference; failure of formal systems to provide metaphysical solace.
Trauma Theory (Caruth, LaCapra)	Latency; unclaimed experience; repetitive 'acting out' vs. reflective 'working through'	Inescapable recurrence of Alicia in Bobby's memory; narrative non-linearity; Manhattan Project legacy operating as transgenerational trauma.
Phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty)	Embodied consciousness; relational perception; intentionality; perceptual ambiguity	Alicia's interrogation of sensory truth; Thalidomide Kid as liminal perceptual entity; Bobby's submerged sensory encounters with oceanic voids.

5. CONCLUSION

Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* represent a profound examination of consciousness, memory, and existence. Transcending conventional portrayals of mental illness, the novels link trauma to perception, identity, and existential uncertainty. Bobby Western's unresolved grief exemplifies long-term trauma, transforming memory into a permanent presence that resists closure. Alicia Western's hallucinations, mathematical intellect, and existential dread challenge the validity of empirical common sense, drawing the reader into the epistemological instability of consciousness.

The study has demonstrated that memory functions as a volatile, non-linear medium connecting the siblings across death. Their entangled relationship serves as a structure carrying trauma, guilt, and shared suffering from past to present. Furthermore, McCarthy links psychological fragmentation directly to the limits of reality: rational knowledge uncovers complexity rather than eliminating uncertainty, while mathematics describes structural order without resolving existential angst.

The phenomenological dimension of the duology reveals that reality is actively constructed through embodied consciousness, rendering perception inherently precarious. Disrupted linear chronology, alternating narrative perspectives, and unresolved mysteries mirror the fragmented mind. Ultimately, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* establish that violence has turned inward—

from the physical landscape to the human psyche. In a universe where complete certainty remains unattainable, the continuous, open-ended search for meaning defines the core of human existence.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

A. Sathiya Jothi: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Textual Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Literature Curation. Dr. C. Vairavan: Supervision, Methodology, Conceptual Validation, Critical Review & Editing, Project Administration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it involves qualitative literary and philosophical analysis of published texts and does not involve human or animal subjects.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new empirical datasets were generated during the study. All analyzed literary texts and secondary sources are publicly available through referenced publications.

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