*Choose a novel or short story in which a key incident conveys the central concerns of the text. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain the ways in which they are deployed to convey these central concerns.*

Intro

The Road by Cormac McCarthy is a poignant and intense novel within which a **key incident** is used to convey the **central concerns** of the text. McCarthy’s description of **setting** and employment of **symbolism**, **narrative technique** and **characterisation** in the lead up to and within the incident present an **exploration of barbarity versus civilization** and the battle between good and evil within mankind.

The Road is set in a post-apocalyptic world in which a man has elected to keep himself and his son alive in a fallen world that is peopled mostly by depraved cannibals. All life forms other than some humans have died off and survival is the priority for those who inhabit this setting. Some have lost their civilised values, but the man and boy retain theirs – keeping faith in hope and goodness. The man tells his son that he is ‘carrying the fire’, which is a **metaphor** for holding, protecting and sharing some of the things that fire **symbolises** – light, truth, hope, human progress and civilization. Fire, of course, can also burn, and this **ambiguity** is continued into McCarthy’s presentation of human nature throughout the novel. The man worships his son. Through **free indirect speech**, we hear the mind of the man, and we see the way that he perceives his son as sacred, the last vestige of goodness on earth. He sees him as ‘god’s own firedrake’ – a dragon protecting the light of goodness. The **semantic field** of religious references also depicts the boy as ‘glowing like a tabernacle’, and having the hair curls ‘good to house a god’. For the father, the son is an image of perfect innocence, and in a sense this is a **parallel** made by MacCarthy between father (God) and son (Christ). If we follow this idea, the fire they carry **represents** the holy spirit.

Context,

Analysis/explanation of characters

In the **build up** to **the key incident** when man and boy come across the plantation house, they watch in the dead trees as a band of cannibals travel the road:

Context

Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women…and lastly… catamites… fitted in dogcollars.

The values of the cannibals are **juxtaposed** with those of the man and boy. The depraved and barbaric cannibals’ priorities are clear – violence (goods of war) first, then women who seem to be of lower value and only used as sources of food. Behind these come the children, kept as sex slaves. The **contrast** between their values and the man and boy’s is clear – the man considers his child to be sacred and precious, more valuable than anything else on Earth; for the cannibals, children are there to be subjects of abuse. This frightening **incident foreshadows** and **builds up to the incident** at the plantation house.

Analysis

As the **protagonists** continue to travel the road, they come across a large house which is the **setting** for one of the **key incidents** of the novel:

They came upon a once grand house… the house was tall and stately with white doric columns across the front… its windows strangely intact (111)…

The boy is reluctant to approach the house – he seems to sense the danger it poses. His protestations jar with his father’s insistence that they investigate, and **the tension** produced is strengthened by McCarthy’s **employment of free indirect speech**. **Narrative technique** builds the incident to a **climactic** moment. McCarthy continues to **build tension** by hinting at recent human habitation of the house whilst slowing down the man’s seemingly endless search for a tool with which to open the trap door they have found that leads to a cellar. When it is eventually opened, they discover a horrific secret:

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, all trying to hide…

Literally and **metaphorically** carrying the fire, they find people being held as livestock in this subterranean cellar of horror. The man drops his lighter as they flee, hinting at the notion that they have at least temporarily dropped the fire (their values) by not helping the prisoners. The plantation house is **symbolic** of the duality of human nature, with good and evil both present. On the exterior it looks ‘intact’ and unthreatening (its colour is white, **symbolic** of purity); however, deep within it, hidden away in a dark place underneath everything else, is hidden the violence and barbarity that perhaps we are all capable of. The fact that once ‘chattel slaves had walked these boards’ reminds us that the evil hidden within this house is not new, that humans have always been capable of evil, and that in the post-apocalyptic world of the novel most humans have regressed back to primitive, barbaric behaviour. The horrible discovery develops McCarthy’s **exploration of themes** of human nature and the place of good and evil within that.

McCarthy then develops characterisation through the events of this **incident.** The main **protagonists** flee when they see cannibals returning to the house, and they hide in a nearby field. Throughout the novel the man faces the **central crisis** of how to protect his son from capture, and he has trained him to commit suicide in the event of the father’s death. In this moment of extreme **crisis and tension**, the man realises his son won’t kill himself if caught, and he decides against diverting the cannibals’ attention away from the boy, and pledges to stay with him, making an important promise to do so. Through **free and indirect speech**, we hear the now full-blown dilemma he faces through his voice: “Can you do it? When the time comes?”. He struggles with this **inner conflict**, which has now become even more complicated. He is slowly dying (he has been coughing blood for most of the novel, suggesting a serious respiratory illness). When he dies, even if they survive this incident and they are on the road again, can he do what he says he will? He says he will ‘never leave’ the boy. Under this life and death pact he must kill his son before he himself dies. This promise influences the remainder of the novel as the father faces the reality of what this promise means. It poses a moral dilemma that haunts the man.

The **main protagonists** survive the incident at the plantation house, and in the **denouement**, we are relieved to read that he cannot keep his promise:

Just take me with you…

I cant hold my son dead in my arms…

You said you wouldn’t ever leave me.

I know. I’m sorry. You have my whole heart.

His last **act** of protection of his son is not to kill him; it is to act in a way that emphasises hope, and faith in the boy’s capacity to survive. He breaks the promise he made outside the plantation house, but this act only accentuates that sometimes we must break our moral code in order to achieve a greater good. In this devastatingly **moving passage**, he leaves his son to find a way to survive. The ending, when the boy is found by a family who also seem to be ‘carrying the fire’, justifies the faith and hope shown by the father. At the end of the novel, goodness, hope and the foundation blocks of civilization live on to continue the fight against evil in the world.

McCarthy employs a **climactic key incident** that incorporates **narrative technique, symbolism and characterisation**. The incident conveys the novel’s **central concerns** – the battle between good and evil in human nature, the battle between civilization and barbarism in human society. The events at the plantation house also develop **character** and the **inner conflict** experienced by one of the **main protagonists**. The life and death promise he makes in this scene haunts him, and ultimately it is a promise he cannot keep.