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**Drowning and Dreaming: Navigating Mental Illness in McCarthy's  
Twin Novels**

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**Abstract**

Cormac McCarthy's *Stella Maris* and *The Passenger* explore themes of mental illness, pain, inner struggles, and medical treatment. The novels follow siblings Alicia and Bobby Western, who face deep emotional and psychological suffering. Alicia, a gifted mathematician, is diagnosed with schizophrenia and admitted to the Stella Maris psychiatric hospital. She speaks with her doctor about her hallucinations, fears, and beliefs, questioning the meaning of her illness. She refuses medication, showing how psychiatry sometimes fails to fully understand a person's mind. Her struggle highlights the limits of medical treatment when dealing with deep emotional pain. Bobby, a deep-sea diver, suffers from guilt, grief, and trauma after losing his father and sister. Unlike Alicia, he does not seek medical help but instead isolates himself, trying to escape his past. He feels lost in the world, haunted by unanswered questions and personal suffering. Alicia is unable to overcome her pain and takes her own life, showing the tragic side of mental illness. Bobby, however, continues moving forward, even though he is still struggling. His survival suggests that endurance is a form of healing. McCarthy's novels question how medicine treats mental illness and whether true healing comes from within. They show that understanding and human connection are as important as medical treatment.

**Keywords:** Mental Illness, Pain, Psychiatry, Inner Struggles



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### Introduction:

Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are deeply philosophical and psychological novels that explore the limits of consciousness, the burden of intellect, and the existential suffering of two profoundly troubled siblings, Bobby and Alicia Western. These novels weave themes of mental illness, grief, isolation, and existential inquiry into an intricate meditation on the human condition. Alicia, a mathematically gifted woman diagnosed with schizophrenia, wrestles with hallucinatory figures and a philosophical despair that ultimately leads to her suicide. Bobby, a salvage diver, is haunted by his sister's death, the enigmatic disappearance of a crashed plane, and his own inability to find meaning in life. Through their struggles, McCarthy interrogates the nature of thought, existence, and human suffering, presenting a world where knowledge is both a source of illumination and a curse. By examining the role of mental illness, grief, isolation, and existential philosophy in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, McCarthy reveals how intellectual brilliance and metaphysical inquiry can be both a means of seeking truth and a path toward personal destruction.

Unlike McCarthy's previous works—such as *Blood Meridian*, which examines violence as a cosmic force, or *The Road*, which portrays survival in a post-apocalyptic world—*The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* delve into the psychological and metaphysical dimensions of human suffering. These novels are less concerned with external dangers and more focused on the ways in which intellect, memory, and philosophical inquiry become battlegrounds for personal torment. Alicia, a mathematical genius diagnosed with schizophrenia, is tormented by hallucinatory figures, particularly The Kid, who serves as both a trickster and a manifestation of her subconscious despair. Her brilliance isolates her from the world, and her relentless search for truth leads her to the realization that no absolute answers exist—a revelation that ultimately drives her to suicide. Bobby, on the other hand, is a man in exile, haunted by Alicia's death, the unresolved mysteries surrounding a missing plane, and the weight of his own existence. His grief renders him incapable of finding meaning or connection, leading to a life of avoidance and detachment. At the heart of both novels is the idea that knowledge is a double-edged sword. Alicia's deep engagement with mathematics, particularly Gödel's incompleteness theorems, underscores the paradox that absolute knowledge is unattainable, and human understanding will always be limited. This realization, rather than offering enlightenment, plunges her into despair, reinforcing McCarthy's view that intellect can be as much a curse as a gift. Bobby, though not as overtly philosophical as Alicia, embodies another existential dilemma—the struggle of a man who is unable to move beyond grief and uncertainty. His disillusionment with life mirrors the existentialist idea that human beings are condemned to search for meaning in a world that



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refuses to provide it. Throughout *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, McCarthy engages with major philosophical themes, drawing from existentialism, nihilism, and metaphysical inquiry. The novels raise profound questions about reality, perception, morality, and the human condition: Is there meaning in suffering? Can intellect bring salvation, or does it only deepen despair? Is isolation a necessary condition of philosophical and mathematical genius? These questions remain unresolved, reinforcing McCarthy's vision of a universe where certainty is an illusion and knowledge often leads to ruin. By intertwining mental illness, grief, isolation, and existential thought, McCarthy crafts a deeply unsettling yet profoundly insightful narrative about the burdens of consciousness. *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are not merely character studies but philosophical treatises on the dangers of intellectual pursuit and the inevitability of suffering. Through Alicia and Bobby, McCarthy suggests that the greatest conflict is not between people, nor between individuals and society, but within the mind itself—the ultimate battleground where knowledge and despair collide.

*The Passenger* follows Bobby Western, a man who works as a deep-sea diver. His job is to explore shipwrecks and underwater crashes. The story begins when he is sent to investigate a plane that has crashed into the ocean. As he examines the wreck, he notices something strange. One of the passengers is missing, and the plane's black box recorder is gone. This makes him uneasy because it suggests that someone removed them before he arrived. Soon, Bobby realizes that he is being watched. Government agents start following him, searching his apartment, and freezing his bank accounts. It becomes clear that they believe he knows something important, even though he does not understand what it could be. He feels trapped and confused, not knowing why he has become a target. As the agents close in on him, he starts to withdraw from his life, moving from place to place to avoid them.

At the same time, Bobby is struggling with deep personal pain. His younger sister, Alicia, has recently died by suicide. He loved her deeply, and her death leaves him feeling empty and lost. Alicia was highly intelligent but also suffered from mental illness. She often had visions of strange, imaginary creatures, which made her life difficult. Even though Bobby loved her, their relationship was complicated. He carries a heavy burden of guilt, feeling that he failed to save her. Another source of his pain is his father, a scientist who worked on the atomic bomb. Bobby is haunted by his family's connection to such destruction. He questions what it means to be part of a world where people create weapons that can kill millions. This adds to his sense of isolation and sadness. He wonders about the meaning of life and struggles with the knowledge that the world can be cruel and unfair. As Bobby runs from both the government and his past, he refuses to seek medical or psychological help. He does not trust doctors, and he does not believe that talking about his problems will help. Instead, he chooses



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to live in isolation, spending time with different people but never staying in one place for long. He meets old friends, drifts through bars and hotels, and avoids deep connections with anyone. He seems to be searching for something, but he does not know what it is. In the end, Bobby never truly finds peace. He continues to move from place to place, burdened by his past. His story is one of sadness, mystery, and survival. He does not find clear answers, but he keeps going, even as the weight of his memories follows him.

On the other hand, *Stella Maris* that tells the story of Alicia Western, a young woman who is a mathematical genius but also suffers from schizophrenia. The book is written in the form of conversations between Alicia and her psychiatrist at Stella Maris, a psychiatric hospital. Through these discussions, Alicia shares her thoughts on reality, her illness, and the nature of human understanding. Alicia is highly intelligent and gifted in mathematics, but she also experiences hallucinations. One of these hallucinations is a figure she calls The Kid, who often appears to her. Unlike other people, Alicia does not see her hallucinations as something separate from reality. She questions whether the world she perceives is real or just an illusion. She does not believe that medicine can truly help her and refuses to take any medication.

As Alicia talks with her psychiatrist, she reveals her deep struggles. She has always felt disconnected from the world around her. Even though she is brilliant, her mind is also a source of great pain. She does not feel that she belongs anywhere. Her intelligence allows her to understand complex mathematical concepts, but it also isolates her from others. She finds it difficult to relate to people, and her hallucinations make her feel even more alone.

Throughout the book, Alicia discusses important philosophical and scientific ideas. She talks about mathematics, physics, and the nature of reality. She wonders whether the world itself is an illusion and whether human understanding has any real limits. Her conversations with the psychiatrist reveal her deep curiosity about life but also her despair. Alicia does not see her illness as something that can be cured. She does not believe that therapy or medicine will change anything. Instead, she feels trapped in her own mind, unable to escape her suffering. Her intelligence does not bring her happiness; instead, it makes her more aware of the painful truths about existence. The story of *Stella Maris* is deeply tragic. Despite her brilliance, Alicia cannot find a way to live in the world. She feels that there is no hope for her. In the end, she chooses to end her own life. She believes that there is no escape from her pain, and death is the only way out.

### **Mental Illness as a Catalyst for Philosophical and Psychological Conflict**

Alicia Western is the central character in *Stella Maris*. She is a brilliant mathematician with a deep understanding of abstract theories and complex ideas. Her mind works differently from most people, and she often thinks about deep philosophical and



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existential questions. However, her intelligence does not bring her peace. Instead, it makes her feel isolated from the world. Alicia also struggles with schizophrenia, which affects how she experiences reality. She has hallucinations and conversations with people who do not exist. These experiences make her feel even more alone. Despite her illness, she refuses to take medication. She does not trust psychiatry and believes that medicine cannot truly help her. Instead, she chooses to deal with her suffering in her own way, even though it leads her further into despair. Alicia Western's schizophrenia is not merely a medical condition but a profound philosophical and psychological crisis. Her hallucinations, led by The Kid, represent not only her fractured perception of reality but also a manifestation of her intellectual anxieties. McCarthy's portrayal of Alicia's illness aligns with existentialist thought, particularly the idea that madness can arise from an acute awareness of reality's absurdity. In the tradition of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, Alicia's schizophrenia can be seen as both an affliction and an insight—her mind's struggle to reconcile the paradoxes of existence.

From a psychological perspective, Alicia's condition exhibits traits of both paranoid schizophrenia and schizotypal personality disorder, characterized by deep-seated detachment, philosophical rumination, and hallucinatory experiences. Jungian psychology suggests that her hallucinations could be understood as archetypal figures—representations of her subconscious mind attempting to reconcile contradictions in her worldview. The Kid, for instance, is both a tormentor and a guide, engaging Alicia in dialogues that blur the line between reality and imagination, logic and madness. Alicia's obsession with mathematics, particularly Gödel's incompleteness theorems, reflects her existential despair. Gödel demonstrated that within any formal mathematical system, there will always be true statements that cannot be proven. For Alicia, this mathematical paradox becomes a metaphor for the limits of human knowledge—her realization that ultimate truth is inaccessible contributes to her descent into madness. She perceives not just the world but reality itself as fundamentally unstable, mirroring existentialist concerns about the absurdity and incompleteness of human understanding.

Bobby, though not suffering from schizophrenia, exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe depression. The psychological weight of his father's involvement in the Manhattan Project, his guilt over Alicia's fate, and the unresolved mystery of the downed aircraft contribute to his growing paranoia and detachment from society. His existential conflict, unlike Alicia's, is rooted not in theoretical knowledge but in lived experience—he is a man adrift in a world where meaning has been eroded by grief and unanswered questions.



### **Grief and the Inescapable Burden of Memory**

McCarthy presents grief in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* as an inescapable force that shapes both Bobby and Alicia's narratives, defining their interactions with the world and themselves. Grief is not merely emotional suffering but an existential condition, one that dictates their fates and exemplifies McCarthy's broader meditation on loss, memory, and the limits of human endurance. Bobby's grief over Alicia's suicide is the central tragedy of his life, manifesting in his transient lifestyle, his inability to form or maintain meaningful relationships, and his gradual retreat from society. His mourning extends beyond personal loss, it encompasses a larger existential crisis, as he grapples with the nature of death, the irreversibility of time, and the futility of human connection in the face of mortality.

Alicia, too experiences profound grief, though hers is more abstract and philosophical. Unlike Bobby, whose grief is deeply personal, Alicia mourns the impossibility of absolute knowledge, the failures of language and logic to capture truth, and the limitations of human understanding. Her despair is not merely emotional but intellectual—she perceives the contradictions of existence and the futility of seeking definitive meaning in a universe governed by uncertainty. This intellectual grief mirrors her emotional suffering, as she becomes increasingly aware of her own decline and views suicide as the only rational resolution to her predicament. Freud's theory of melancholia suggests that deep, unresolved grief leads to self-destruction, a concept that is evident in both siblings. Alicia internalizes her suffering, which ultimately consumes and annihilates her, while Bobby, paralyzed by the past, becomes a spectral figure, wandering through life without direction. In McCarthy's world, grief is not a wound that time can heal but a cyclical, inescapable affliction, reinforcing his bleak vision of human suffering as something that cannot be conquered—only endured.

### **Isolation as Both a Defense Mechanism and a Path to Despair**

Both Alicia and Bobby experience isolation, but for different reasons. Alicia's isolation is largely self-imposed—she recognizes that her intellect and schizophrenia separate her from the rest of the world. Her preference for engaging with The Kid over real people underscores her detachment from social reality. In existentialist terms, Alicia embodies the alienated intellectual, akin to Camus' *The Stranger* or Kierkegaard's "Knight of Infinite Resignation." She sees the world as fundamentally indifferent to her suffering and chooses to withdraw entirely. Bobby's isolation, by contrast, is circumstantial as well as psychological. The enigmatic forces pursuing him after the plane crash investigation push him into exile, but his deeper isolation stems from his grief and existential paralysis. He drifts through life as a man severed from any sense of belonging, embodying Sartre's notion of the individual condemned to freedom—adrift in a meaningless world without direction. His final retreat to



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Spain signals not just physical exile but existential resignation, a quiet surrender to the inevitability of isolation. McCarthy's treatment of isolation suggests that while human connection is essential, those burdened with profound intellectual and emotional suffering often find themselves cut off from the world. Alicia and Bobby's fates illustrate the paradox of isolation—it can serve as a means of self-preservation, but ultimately, it leads to self-destruction.

### Existential Thought and the Search for Meaning

The philosophical undercurrents in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* firmly position both novels within the existentialist tradition, exploring the tension between human intellect and the absurdity of existence. Alicia's philosophical despair stems from her recognition of the limits of knowledge, particularly through her engagement with Gödel's incompleteness theorems, which suggest that no system of thought can be entirely self-sufficient or complete. This realization mirrors the existentialist crisis—the search for meaning in a world that refuses to provide it. Her dialogues with Dr. Cohen in *Stella Maris* are intellectual battlegrounds where she wrestles with nihilistic conclusions, lamenting the inability of mathematics, physics, or human cognition to uncover absolute truth. Unlike existentialists who find freedom in uncertainty, Alicia finds only despair, leading her to conclude that suicide is the only logical resolution to her suffering. Bobby, in contrast, does not actively engage in abstract existential inquiry, yet his life is shaped by existentialist themes. His aimless drifting, emotional detachment, and inability to move beyond grief reflect the classic existentialist archetype—one who is burdened by existence yet unable to impose meaning upon it. His conflicts with unseen governmental forces in *The Passenger* symbolize the paranoia and powerlessness that existentialist thinkers like Sartre and Camus associated with modern existence—a world where forces beyond one's control shape one's fate. His final retreat into exile is not a form of liberation but a surrender to meaninglessness, reinforcing McCarthy's vision of a world where knowledge, grief, and isolation converge in the inescapable tragedy of existence.

### Conclusion:

In *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, Cormac McCarthy crafts a devastating exploration of mental illness, grief, isolation, and existential thought, demonstrating how consciousness itself can become an unbearable weight. Bobby and Alicia Western are not merely victims of external circumstances but of their own minds—Alicia, tormented by the contradictions of mathematics and schizophrenia, and Bobby, consumed by grief and existential inertia. Their suffering is not just personal; it is a reflection of a larger philosophical crisis, one that questions the very nature of existence and human understanding. Through their



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struggles, McCarthy presents an unsettling meditation on the cost of intellectual and existential inquiry, suggesting that the deeper one delves into the nature of reality, the more elusive, paradoxical, and terrifying it becomes. McCarthy's vision of existence aligns with existentialist and nihilist thought, particularly in his depiction of knowledge as both a pursuit and a curse. Alicia's engagement with mathematics and metaphysics leads her not to enlightenment, but to despair, illustrating the idea that absolute knowledge is unattainable and that human cognition is inherently limited. Bobby, though less overtly philosophical, is equally burdened by thought—his inability to let go of the past, to make peace with Alicia's death, and to find meaning in the present leaves him in a state of perpetual exile. Neither sibling finds solace, reinforcing McCarthy's bleak perspective on the futility of human existence and the inevitability of suffering. Ultimately, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* do not offer redemption or resolution. Instead, they present the quiet, unrelenting weight of existence itself, where consciousness is both a gift and a curse, and the search for meaning leads only to deeper uncertainty. In McCarthy's world, to think deeply is to suffer deeply, and in the end, both Bobby and Alicia are undone by the very minds that set them apart.

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