A clash is an act of violence. It destroys. It combines. It forces movement, whether good or bad. Such acts of collision permeate the pages of Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel The Road. The author, in particular, uses the character of the unnamed Man to demonstrate the power of cultural collisions as he interacts with those around him in their Hellish, frozen landscape. Indeed, through his intercourse with those who have chosen to be cannibals, his own wife, and his own son, he learns the pain and joy of personal growth by observing both failure and success in others.

The most obvious example of a cultural collision in the novel is the Man’s encounters with those who have succumb to cannibalism as an answer to the rampant starvation of this new world. In one particularly austere moment, the Man and his Son are confronted by such a man while in the forest. The Man feels a sense of obligation to protect his son, so he shoots the cannibal (who has taken his son hostage), and then they make a hasty escape to ensconce themselves deeper in the wood. Here, McCarthy puts the Man in direct conflict with one who has chosen another path through this despondent life. This cannibal is not so different from the Man. He only seeks to survive, and the Man feels forced to inflict the very thing for which he judges the cannibals: the death of another person. Clearly, in such circumstances, death is unavoidable, and the Man has to now face himself as being guilty of killing. He spends much of the novel trying to tell him son how they are different from the cannibals, but the line is gossamer in such moments. The Man knows this, which is why he does not dwell on such moments. He is driven to move on to the next tragedy and search of the survival that he willingly takes from others, yet judging himself more deserving of.

The Man’s collision with death is not limited to the cannibals, however. He must also face it within his own family. Whereas the
cannibals turn to death as a form of survival, the Man’s own wife embraces suicide as a way to escape the harrowing world around her. Indeed, she refers to death as her “lover,” and she longs for his caress. The Man cannot comprehend this, and they are left without a way to commiserate. His inability to find common ground with her is what drives his anger throughout the rest of the novel. He hates her choice because he cannot understand it. She looked at the world (including him and their son) and did not see enough to live for; for the Man this is a personal affront to what he holds dear: survival. McCarthy’s inclusion of the Wife’s suicide is designed to demonstrate what a lack of connection can do to us. We reach out to those around us in hopes of finding what we need, but we rarely account for what that other person needs him or herself. Thus, McCarthy punishes the Man with anger and guilt, once again, to teach him the value of seeing life from another point of view. While the Wife’s view of life confounds the Man, it doesn’t make it any less valid. Each character seeks for meaning in this madness, but the lack of empathy and connection is what truly leaves each one alone.

However, the Man’s identity undergoes a drastic metamorphosis because of his son. His angry, hurting soul collides with the Boy’s in a way that creates true movement. The Son, born after the nameless disaster, has never known the world as we know it. His world is what it is. Because of this, he doesn’t suffer the same pains of transition and he sees people through the lens of how things are in their current situation, not judged against extinct standards. To this point, all of the Boy’s and Man’s possessions are stolen by a Thief, and the Man, when they catch him, forces him to strip naked in the freezing temperatures. To the Man, this is justice; he views it as we would. However, to the Boy, this is another senseless death in a world full of death. He begs his father to go back and help the thief, but the Man cannot understand.
how this would help them. It is at this point that their colliding views spark a new thought in the Man. The Boy helps him to realize that they are no different from the thief: survivors in a dying world. To the Boy, everyone is equal because everyone shares this burden. The Man imbibes this idea like fresh water, and he realizes the root of his anger and frustration: disconnection. The Boy has faith and love for others because he feels them as part of the same world. McCarthy’s inclusion of this discussion helps to highlight the notion that change in ourselves is only possible when we allow collisions to move us, inside and out.

In the end, McCarthy uses cultural collisions, micro as they may be, to demonstrate the necessity of connection and change, especially when hope is so gossamer. People need to feel understood, and they, like the Man, will push their own views and feelings to the point that they forget to consider those that are not their own. The Man, in his bitterness at the change in the physical world, forgets to evolve on the inside. It takes a child of his new reality to cool his anger and allow a new road to open before him: a road, though brief, that will bring him closer to his son and the peace that he so desperately sought, but never thought he’d find.

One does not usually think of the “cosmos” as a “wet thick” swamp, but in these muddy waters one can find the duality that defines our existence. Mary Oliver, in her poem “Crossing the Swamp,” uses vivid diction and imagery along with transformative metaphor with surprising irony to express what the speaker learns from the swamp: that the same world that threatens to swallow one up can also engender new hope, life, and opportunities.

Oliver begins her examination of the relationship between the speaker and the swamp with a pondering of the “endless/ wet thick”
nature of the swamp, which she terms as the “cosmos” that can represent “struggle” as one “sink[s] silently/ into the black… earthsoup.” This swamp overwhelms the body and the mind. It has to be overcome and requires toil and struggle to be bested....

When one is able to overcome these initial struggles, the swamp opens to speaker to give rewards and renewal...