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## REDISCOVERY OF REALITY AND GENRE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

### Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world in *The Road* is eerily reminiscent of our own in numerous aspects. Material devastation is, nevertheless, in the background of this novel, although it is intertwined with the destruction of words and the very essence of humanity. This paper analyzes the key segments of McCarthy's redefinition of both the conventions of reality and genre in order to show that *The Road* primarily focuses on the loss of humanity rather than on the obliteration of a system or a culture. The true demise lies in the depletion of meaning – the destruction of our world is of secondary importance. The main characteristics of the post-apocalyptic genre and McCarthy's idiom are examined in order to argue this point. The two main protagonists are on a pilgrimage of discovery into the unknown and back to the origins of the New World, to the East Coast. Hope confronts hopelessness when the two heroes, as remnants of a true humanity worth preserving, rediscover the continent by retracing the steps of westward expansion back to the Ocean. The father provides a sense of loss, while the son represents the spark of a new beginning.

**Key words:** Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, the post-apocalypse, humanity,

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“...I thought that men had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction. Into disasters of a certain magnitude.” (McCarthy, 1997: 94)

As a subgenre of SF and horror, post-apocalyptic fiction focuses on the loss of those features of the present world which, from the author’s perspective at least, should be treasured and would be profoundly missed. More often than not, such works turn into exploitation, and audiences are invited to share the author’s fears of a cataclysm leading to a regression of values and the social order as we know them. As a rule, the aftermath is what counts, not the Armageddon itself.

Comparing *The Road* to other similar works, such as Philip K. Dick’s short story “Second Variety”, would not be an easy task. McCarthy’s vision of the end of the world is certainly not the first instance of someone warning primarily against expanding the limits of cruelty and the deterioration of the human condition, but *The Road* may nevertheless be the most convincing and the grimmest post-apocalyptic novel to date, not because it depicts the loss of technology or even the destruction of nature.

McCarthy has successfully managed to transcend post-apocalyptic clichés and add new meanings to the oldest human emotion instead of merely abusing it. We are all aware of the extent to which our apocalyptic anxieties are fueled by threats from our own reality – be it wars or terrorist attacks, our fears simply refuse to go away. In *The Road*, fear is a credible motivational force of a completely different kind. Against the bleak backdrop of McCarthy’s vision, our own end-of-the-world fears are altered together with the lost world. McCarthy’s story is as meticulous and straightforward as it is exceptional.

McCarthy does with the post-apocalypse the same thing he has done with the western so many times before. He utilizes it as a recognizable setting. Depictions of the aftermath and struggle for survival are essential parts of many post-apocalyptic novels, and constitute elementary genre conventions; human relations like love and violence can be tailored either to fit a particular genre and its target audiences, or to surpass them, as is the case with *The Road*. McCarthy therefore makes numerous exceptions to the standards of the genre: among other things, he introduces a new type of hero, redefines the aftermath of the apocalypse and, of course, alters the ending accordingly.

Is *The Road* really a post-apocalyptic novel? When Ely, the only character with a name in this book, says “There is no God and we are his prophets”

(McCarthy, 2007: 19), no one can say for certain whether he is referring to the lost world or the new one. Indeed, there are hints that McCarthy is in fact describing our own reality instead of the post-apocalyptic one. Even though the two worlds appear to be immensely different in almost every aspect, this is not entirely so. As is the case with his other novels, McCarthy relegates the modern world into the background in order to highlight the characters and the ideas that these characters stand for. The rediscovery of reality means that McCarthy strips away our world, by means of a nuclear holocaust, in order to focus on that which is hidden in plain sight.

### **The heroes**

The novel tells the story of a man and his son traveling south, across the scorched wasteland, along the eastern American seaboard about a decade after an unnamed catastrophe set off a nuclear winter that has choked the land with ubiquitous gray ash, killed the vegetation and driven the few survivors to cannibalism. Society as we know it has collapsed: groups of marauders rigged out in barbaric battle-gear roam the crumbling byways in search of the only flesh available – human flesh.

In a world where almost all human values are all but gone, the father and son stand for those worth keeping. The boy's father is as far as one could be from a typical post-apocalyptic hero. His ever worsening cough is as good a signal of imminent doom as is cannibalism and utter destruction. Not unlike the two main characters, the reader too is left in search of hope. Nonetheless, the genre conventions clearly state that there have to be good guys and bad guys, as indeed there are. But McCarthy has redefined the concept of being a good guy in his own recognizable manner. Better yet, we know who wants to be a good guy. The boy is the ultimate good guy, in part because he is unaware of all the horrors of the world. He leads the father on a voyage of finding humanity in post-nuclear wastelands defined by fighting for self-preservation. This is a novel in which perplexing allegories and popular culture blend into one. Throughout both history and literature, newcomers to strange worlds have often been led by guides. On the other hand, however, a dominant, usually male figure, accompanied by a child, has been and still is an icon of popular culture. In a sense, the father and the son may even be regarded as one person.

McCarthy's world in *The Road* is another frontier, except that the father and his son are in a way retracing the conquest of America back to the beginning. In fact, *The Bird of Hope*, which is the name of the ship from Tenerife, i.e. from the Old World, which they see towards the end, could be a new *Mayflower*, and the two protagonists a type of pilgrim or explorer of the New World. Except that this ship heralds the destruction of the reality from which it comes, and consequently hope seems to be lost. So what holds our attention is not a band of fearless survivalists or preppers, but a father and a son, at the end of their tether, always on the verge of extinction, as is the world they inhabit. This process of retracing takes place both in space and in time, and it has several facets to it; it refers to the retracing of human values as well as the nucleus of humanity, such as the father's love for his son or refusal to eat human flesh for sustenance. The father's memories and some of his dreams are also a way of retracing.

Just like John Grady Cole or Billy Parham in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, these heroes are often among the last of their kind, and in this case, the last remnants of the true humanity and values which they desperately seek to preserve: "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up (McCarthy, 2007: 160)".

On the other hand, the cannibals in the novel seek only to preserve themselves, and are therefore condemned to a life of solitude, devoid of any human connection, just like the wind-up penguin toys from one of the boy's dreams. They have no "ceremonies constructed out of thin air" (McCarthy, 2007: 45). Without the deeper meaning provided by humanity, any form of sustenance, be it cannibalism or technology, is ultimately futile in this post-apocalyptic nightmare.

The son is being initiated into the world of adults through all the violence and the final loss that he witnesses.

### **The nothingness of the world**

In *The Road*, memories of lost worlds and the nightmares of the new one are closely intertwined; nightmares bear a strong resemblance to reality, just as dreams do to the past. One of the first images we see is the father's nightmare or a nightmarish vision of a strange monster, taking place in a nightmare world. It is a nightmare within a nightmare. Monsters still

occupy nightmares, but once awake, both the father and the son know that in reality the only monsters are human beings, not mutants, as in popular post-apocalyptic fiction, where humanity mutates on the outside. Although this might be a warning that reality actually extends beyond what we remember, perceive or dream, in a world where old meanings give way to new ones, dreams are still what they need to be for human nature – that is, nightmares are still inhabited by monsters, as dreams are by creeks teeming with trout. *The Road* opens and closes with a dream: the nightmare of a monster at the beginning, and a distant memory, or perhaps a fantasy of trout in a creek: "...rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world..." (McCarthy, 2007: 111)

There has been an unknown catastrophe, a "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy, 2007: 45). One imagines a kind of nuclear cataclysm. The world as we know it is all but gone. Corpses scatter the landscape. Ash falls like constant snow, and through this wasteland roam the novel's two protagonists. Days become "more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (McCarthy, 2007: 1). And yet, the barren landscapes of *The Road* are strangely indefinite. According to Northrop Frye, the best among McCarthy's novels "involve characters who journey into landscapes that are simultaneously geographical and psychic, typological and mythic, objectively physical and intensely personal" (Frye, 2003: 116). *The Road* is in fact very much like a mirror: a new world is riddled with echoes of the old one:

They passed through towns that warned people away with messages scrawled on the billboards. The billboards had been whited out with thin coats of paint in order to write on them and through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed. (McCarthy, 2007: 127–128)

This passage has been read to mean that there are glimpses of apocalypse in our present reality: destruction of nature coupled with both literal and figurative thinning of humanity. The images are so vividly described that they continue to linger in our minds. Only things are named, while characters, apart from Ely, are not. McCarthy's novels are, almost without exception, at least in part a moral judgment on our system. The technological and

economic prosperity of the lost world has introduced the scarceness and destitution of the new.

One example of the striking similarities between the two worlds is the scene in which the father and son discover an underground shelter filled with canned food. In our reality, this food, together with all the other trinkets the father and the son collect, is just as insignificant as they themselves are. In essence, the father and the son look like a pair of vagrants, clad in greasy parkas, pushing grocery carts. In addition, builders of such shelters might even be dubbed strange, if not worse. But in the world of the post-apocalypse, the very discovery of a secret food stash is a miracle. On the other hand however, the two protagonists start a very polite conversation about what they will eat for supper, then they bathe, change clothes and sit down and eat with plastic plates and utensils, like civilized men. They play checkers. The father himself says at one point that they will conjure humanity, if need be: "When you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them." (McCarthy, 2007: 45). At that point, the boy suggests they thank, in their own way, the people who left the food and the shelter for them, thus evoking the humanity that has been lost. We are talking about a boy who has never seen the sun and has no experience of most colors and smells, and who has no home and only a distant memory of his mother. For McCarthy, being civilized does not mean being technologically advanced. The unnamed father remembers and laments his lost love and nature, but never technology. Although he and his son are physically endangered, their humanity is well preserved. Their purpose is to survive, to keep morality intact and to mature, to endure the hopelessness of the post-apocalyptic reality. Nevertheless, their humanity still does not herald a better world.

### **McCarthy's idiom**

According to Cormac McCarthy, all good literature must "deal with questions of life and death" (Woodward, 1992). It would indeed be difficult not to read *The Road* in the light of McCarthy's previous novels, because in it one finds numerous motifs typical of McCarthy's fiction: desolate landscapes, homelessness, lack of any real plot, simple language, no punctuation, extreme violence, no female protagonists, nihilism, scarce and elementary dialogues. As a rule, hope opposed to hopelessness is another key feature

of his style. His characters often leave the only world they know and face a new one, where there is no promise of restoration and no sustenance. More often than not, McCarthy's heroes travel in pairs of people with opposing views of life. Going on the road means leaving one's world and discovering another one, and this novel is no exception. Drifting ash and spindly rubble are characteristic of the McCarthy canon. The world of the post-apocalypse in *The Road*, populated by monstrous remnants of humanity, is just as harsh and unforgiving as the deserts and desolate landscapes of *Blood Meridian* – all of which have been trademarks of McCarthy's fiction. His novel *The Crossing* ends with a nuclear explosion: "...such is the way of the world, in darkness and ashes... (McCarthy, 1997: 87). In *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Bell and his deputy at one point leave their cars behind and proceed on horses: so there are many instances of technology being either destroyed or left behind in McCarthy's fiction. Preservation of crucial human values is represented by "carrying the fire", which is another recurrent motif:

We're going to be okay, aren't we, Papa?  
Yes, we are.  
And nothing bad is going to happen to us.  
That's right.  
Because we're carrying the fire.  
Yes, Because we're carrying the fire. (McCarthy, 2007: 38)

One finds it in *No Country for Old Men* too, in the dream that concludes the novel, not unlike the vision of nature by which *The Road* ends:

When he rode past I seen he was carrying fire in a horn the way  
people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside  
of it. (McCarthy, 2008: 320)

*No Country for Old Men* is another one of McCarthy's novels which begins with a memory and ends with a dream. The identity of McCarthy's main protagonists is always created while on a journey: as in many of his novels, once they enter wilderness, new rules apply. The father's knowledge of practical skills is as far away from formal education as the post-apocalyptic world is from the old one. In this way, the father may signify old knowledge that in the end dies with him, which is the knowledge we have now, while the son knows nothing of the old world and is instead focused on humanity rather than on survival. Certainly, McCarthy still adheres to the basic tenets of the post-apocalyptic subgenre and those rules stemming from

common sense – the father is in charge most of the time. He is the link to the lost world. Without him, the son would think of the apocalypse as the only given reality, and there would be no sense of loss. This is perhaps ultimately shown in the scene in which the father recollects a stream of water populated by trout.

Losing one's world is a recurrent theme in much of McCarthy's work. His characters are often left behind when a world from which they originate disappears. This disappearance may be literal, as is the case in *The Road*, or figurative, as in *The Sunset Limited*, where the white professor says that "The things that I love are fragile" (Jones, 2011). Sheriff Bell in *No Country for Old Men* is another protagonist left without the world he's been used to, unable to cope with the new one in a similar way that the father in *The Road* is. In *The Crossing*, Billy Parham at one point meets an old blind man, who lost his world by losing his sight:

He said that as the memory of the world must fade so must it fade in his dreams until soon or late he feared that he would have darkness absolute and no shadow of the world that was... Finally he said that on his first years of darkness his dreams had been vivid beyond all expectation and that he had come to thirst for them but that dreams and memories alike had faded one by one until they were no more. (McCarthy, 1997: 190)

Homelessness and wandering constitute one of primary motifs in McCarthy's fiction. A similar passage from *The Crossing* reads like this:

He told the boy that...he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become strangled from men and so ultimately from himself. He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. (McCarthy, 1997: 89)

### **The end of words**

*"The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it."*  
(McCarthy, 2007: 28.)

Just as the old world, together with the language that carried its meaning is obliterated from reality, as much as from memories and dreams, a new one replaces it. Words are in short supply and the father and son use



even words sparsely, as if they were food or fuel. They travel through the desolate world like words through an empty page, because they are the spark of a new meaning. And while our world disintegrates and is replaced by the post-apocalyptic one, so old meanings give way to new ones, and descriptions of this process are extremely powerful and convincing. The annihilation of the old world continues throughout the aftermath of the apocalypse, not only in reality but in language itself, in memories and in dreams:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (McCarthy, 2007: 88-89)

So when the son says "I'm afraid", it is the context that provides the origin of this fear. Our imagination intervenes, and we may assume a multitude of things he might be afraid of. Thus the new world provides its own, horrible semantics. The new reality lacks even the most basic elements such as motion, color and flavor, which are about to disappear from memories and dreams as well: "The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion." (McCarthy, 2007: 75). Obliteration of humanity's most sacred moral rules is far more serious than the destruction of the planet. To survive in a post-apocalyptic world, one must find food and shelter to escape physical demise. But what the two main protagonists are doing is avoiding moral demise as well. Eating human flesh would keep them alive, but at the great cost of losing their humanity. The moral decline of the cannibals they are surrounded with echoes the decline of the world. When the father and son explore a house in the hope of finding some food, they instead stumble upon a cellar full of people, who are presumably kept like livestock by the cannibals:

He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and

stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous. (McCarthy, 2007: 116)

There is no struggle for survival without the struggle for hope. The boy's mother shows no hope and is therefore unwilling to survive. One of the father's memories is the memory of his wife, who committed suicide. Memories of the lost world include her too, so through memories she is also traveling with them, until the father discards her photograph. The will to survive is fueled by the wish to discover the meaning of life, and in McCarthy's work this discovery takes place a long way from home, in deserts or, in this case, a nuclear aftermath. Dreams and memories are an especially important part of the decay of words. The father is fighting hopelessness for his son's sake, which is in sharp contrast to the cannibals who eat their children to keep themselves alive. The father and son constitute a separate world in which human values still hold sway. The decline of men and of the world are inseparable: in the same way those strange warnings are painted over road signs, the creatures that the father and the son meet strangely resemble humans, like effigies of humans painted over: "Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland." (McCarthy, 2007: 28)

## Conclusion

McCarthy rediscovers the genre and culture, its dreams, hopes and fears, and its history, by retracing the steps back to the Ocean, to the origins, as he has already done so many times before. Throughout the course of this novel, the father tells stories to his son. These stories are also "ceremonies conjured out of thin air" (McCarthy, 2007: 45). The boy at one point notices that they always do the right thing in those stories, whereas in reality they do not. Since *The Road* itself is such a story, this could be read to mean more than one thing, especially when one considers all the ambiguities found in this novel.

The main characters and nature in McCarthy's fiction are often opposed to other human beings, who are designated as an evil presence.

The fate of any world is decided, for better or worse, by those who inhabit it, as one sees in the very last paragraph:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsorial. On their backs were vermicular patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy, 2007: 286)

Much of reality for us is indeed bound by what we perceive and say about it. But one does not create and define things by remembering them and giving them names: this is an artificial alteration of reality. It is in this post-apocalyptic world, which many would argue is not worth living in, that the boy must search and find hope, but only within, and not in what he sees. McCarthy obliterates the world so that his readers might be able to see past it: the mother and Ely cannot, and that is why they become prophets of hopelessness. But in this world there is more than meets the eye, more than what can be described. That is why the boy was raised in a reality with no smells or colors – to try and be the carrier of fire and of “patterns of the world in its becoming”.

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