

The Significance of Human Frailty and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

This paper has examined how human frailty and morals play a role in humanity's obsession with (post-) apocalyptic literature. Especially, it has analyzed *The Road* (2006) in light of Literary Darwinism, often known as Evolutionary Literary Study, which has evolutionary psychology as its theoretical foundation. This paper investigates *The Road* in the context of models of human nature and behavior by adopting a literaryDarwinist approach and apocalyptic thought. It is demonstrated that (post-) apocalyptic authors examine human nature and morality when survival is at stake by exploiting both created (cultural) concerns and universal (natural) worries in their dystopian settings. The basic elements of human frailty that McCarthy explores are also assessed in terms of how they align with or conflict with fundamental ideas about human frailty and morality, though in ways that are constrained and channeled by the author's cultural context, personal needs, and the motivation behind writing about such a post-apocalyptic world. McCarthy's ethics and ideals as well as the effect McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world has on readers are examined. Based on the analysis presented in this paper, by emphasizing human frailty and the cultural context of the time, as well as by drawing a distinction between culture and nature through the lens of Literary Darwinism, this paper has found that McCarthy's *The Road* is profoundly influenced by moral characteristics, human nature, and universal human fears and needs.

Keywords: culture, evolution, literary Darwinism, morality, (post-) apocalypse.

Introduction

By all means, *The Road*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Cormac McCarthy, is a dark, gloomy, unsettling, and terrifying post-apocalyptic novel set in a desolate, icy country where "nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what has gone before" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 3). The sun appears to be "banished" from the Earth

behind the thick layers of ash, surrounding “the ground like a bereaved mother with a lamp”. Every genuine post-apocalyptic writer bases the world they create on their own desires and concerns, and they draw inspiration from some fundamental aspects of human nature. In *The Road*, McCarthy draws on themes of apocalypse, morality, and parental love

Methodology

The research uses the qualitative research method for its textual analysis of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*. Literary devices like similes, metaphors, personification, the language of animation, symbols, and images are used to explore the characters within the framework of literary Darwinism and evaluate them in light of both McCarthy's worldview and evolutionary ideas on human nature. This study discusses the inspiration for McCarthy's apocalypse as well as some fundamental features of human nature, (post-)apocalyptic literature, and McCarthy's worldview.

McCarthy's Apocalypse

A work of fiction that “represents a very unpleasant hypothetical world in which worrisome tendencies of our current social, political, and technical order are projected into a tragic future completion” is what Abrams characterizes as a “dystopia,” according to him. Post-apocalypse and *The Road* both fit Abrams' description of dystopian fiction, which describes it as a depiction of a bleak, uncomfortable, fantastical, and tragic future world in which McCarthy's pessimism about people and modern civilization is brought to its most extreme point. Therefore, this book is classified as both dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction by Abrams. *The Road*, according to him, is a dystopian tale “set in a grim, post-nuclear landscape”.

The general premise of post-apocalyptic fiction is that a catastrophic event occurs, seriously altering the world, and that the few remaining people struggle to survive in the post-apocalyptic world, where social, political, cultural, religious, and other institutions and beliefs are no longer relevant or functional. The major event that alters the course of the planet could be a war, pandemic, natural calamity, etc. But *The Road* transformed the genre by changing or reusing some tropes. McCarthy asserts that “his money is on people destroying each other environmental catastrophe kicks in,” despite the fact that he believes a meteor strike will bring about the end of the world. A lifeless homochromatic landscape devoid of warmth, color, the sun, and light is all that's left of the earth. gray, rain, ash, and

soot.

Morality

The moral sensibility of the father and son in the book is pre-apocalyptic. While some favor the behaviors that were perceived as “bad” in the pre-apocalyptic environment, culture, and society, they favor and moralize those particular activities that were recognized as "good" in those settings. But as a result of the apocalypse, nature and the environment have changed, forcing other humans to find new methods to survive. Evolutionary psychologists contend that people are fundamentally capable of both virtue and evil. McCarthy does not focus on other individuals and does not provide details about their clans or little civilizations, but one scene is sufficient to alert readers about their immorality: The other aspect of goodness comes from cultural factors that can be controlled depending on the situation. The father and son remain moral and charitable despite the vast, all-encompassing shift in the world, and by doing so, they feel righteous and pleased.

The Road shows that morality still exists among all people, including cannibals, in light of the arguments put forth by morality scientists, as a sense of right and wrong is a habit that all humans share. Although everyone has the ability to possess all moral qualities, these moral sensibilities "range within individuals as well as between and between groups". A feeling of good and evil is a habit that all humans share, so according to the morality scientists' conclusions, morality still exists in *The Road* among all the characters, including the cannibals. The feeling of right and evil, as well as other moral qualities, "range within individuals as well as within and between communities," despite the fact that everyone has the ability to possess all moral qualities (p. 8).

The boy is partly feral and is unfamiliar with many fundamental cultural structures, society's symbols, and trappings, in general, of life in the pre-apocalyptic world. He was born after the apocalypse that brought an end to human civilization. For instance, they come across a house in one scene when the father is standing and gazing at it. The son inquires, "Papa, what is this place?" The dad responds, "It's the house where I grew up". The father explains to his son, who is waiting outside, that "here is where we used to have Christmas when I was a youngster. Me and my sisters would sit by the fire here [in the yard] on chilly winter nights when the electricity was out due to a storm to finish our homework (p. 22). The youngster finds it challenging to comprehend concepts like "Christmas," "electricity," and "homework." The confused look in his son's eyes that "[w]atched shapes claiming him he could not see" is visible to the parent. Despite leading a primitive life

and feeling uncomfortable hearing about the past, the youngster is fixated on the pre-apocalyptic tales his father tells him. He aspires to be like the fictional heroes.

The youngster is affected by the pre-apocalyptic world as seen by the tales his father tells him, tales with pre-apocalyptic morals that are useless in this new reality. But in this new world, which is full of fresh threats and anxieties and in which the history, culture, values, and morals of the pre-apocalyptic world are no longer relevant, the stories the man tells his kid are no longer useful.

The youngster feels that he should act in accordance with the moral norms of the stories, despite the fact that his father warns him to be cautious, avoid strangers, and if at all possible, run from them. His compassion for other people, therefore, depends not just on his inherent goodness but also on the values he learned from the stories. Based on his moral convictions, the youngster exhibits concern at some of his father's decisions in the first half of the novel until the middle. The boy's morality, therefore, shifts when on the street and interacting with the environment, based on different contextual triggers that are favorable to adaptation and survival. His actions today are the product of the interaction between his pre-apocalyptic ideals, surroundings, and intrinsic relative morality.

Fitting into this new world is a factor that should also be taken into account. If the end of the world had given mankind access to at least life-sustaining elements, then generation after generation of people could gradually adapt to the physical world. However, McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world is so severe that not even food is permitted. In the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, "survival of the fittest"—competition for food supplies, reproductive opportunities, and safe spaces—is being practiced.

The disappearance of the trout shows both that things will not return to normal and that the boy's heroic morals might become less apparent in a desolate world that is too damaged to endure. Being virtuous in the face of unstoppable evil is what McCarthy strives to personify. The boy's kindness in the face of horror implies that, even if this planet is too gravely afflicted to be healed, there is still worth in life—and that value comes in a categorical rejection of fear-based behavior.

Parent-Child Bond

The Road's first line makes it clear that the father-son tie is the book's central theme and that all other themes are derived from it: "When he woke up in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the boy lying beside him." His hand

delicately rose and sank with each priceless breath . Along with keeping the novel as realistic as possible, another reason he avoids discussing the origin of the apocalypse is that he prefers to concentrate on the father and son's struggle to survive in an immoral society and the father's love for his son, who serves as the story's emotional center.

The Road captures McCarthy's bond with his kid. The Road is replete with instances of sacrifice and "parental investment," which refers to any parental expenditure that favors one kid at the expense of parents' capacity to invest in other elements of fitness. The father views his son as a life force and guards him with obsession.

According to the narrative, the mother's decision to kill herself was not taken out of cowardice but rather out of sacrifice. She committed suicide so that she wouldn't be a burden on her son and spouse and to increase their chances of survival. She is mentally and physically spent as her husband gets ready to leave for the South, and she is aware that this weakness will leave the three of them open to attack by the cannibals. She is also aware that her husband has only two bullets remaining in his gun after eight years of living a life of survival, consumed with fear and struggle. The family constantly worries about being kidnapped, raped, killed, and eaten.

The wife's suicide puts more weight on the man's shoulders to carry. The rest of the book also shows the sacrifice and commitment of parents but from the father's perspective. For instance, earlier in the book, the father gives the youngster "a final half package of cocoa" while pouring only hot water for himself (p. 29). He frequently gave his son the last of their scant food while pretending to eat himself so that the youngster would not have to share. The father not only gives his son the majority of the food, but he also spends all of his time and effort protecting him both physically and morally.

The father thinks that his death is getting closer as they endure the trials of their journey. The boy inquires about survival, hope for life, and the continuation of human existence throughout the entire book. When the son asks his father earlier in the book if there could be fish in the lake, the father simply replies, "There's nothing in the lake" (p. 17). When the son later asks, "What if some good folks came?", his father responds that it is unlikely. The youngster says, "Maybe there's a [nother] father and his little boy," in a declarative phrase once more. When the son meets a family who are "nice guys" after his father's passing, the father's desperate desire to protect his kid is revealed in this sentence, which he knows will come true. This is a reflection of McCarthy's advanced age and stems from the worry that he won't live long enough to defend his John. McCarthy is "carrying the fire," and even though he thinks that the world will never be restored right again, he

fervently hopes that after his death, the son will find nice people in this vicious environment.

Conclusion

In an attempt to uncover human frailty, this paper has examined McCarthy's *The Road* in the context of literary Darwinism and historical-cultural studies. The reasons behind the construction of such an apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic world are founded on the changes in McCarthy's worldview. The work exposes the post-apocalyptic features of McCarthy's imaginary universe and he wants his reader to dwell in it. The causes include McCarthy's immersion in science, the birth of his son, being a sexagenarian father, and living in a violent and morally corrupt country. The paper has included analyses of each of these factors.

McCarthy, the father used *The Road* as a vehicle to address two key problems that were causing him anguish in his own life: parenting and human morals. Given the evil in this world, it might be extrapolated that the father (McCarthy) fears being unable to shield his son from harm forever and having to let him grow up without him. McCarthy displays a profound pessimism about humanity's self-destructiveness due to this violent environment in which any moral expediency seems acceptable. He believes that society is deteriorating daily. Even though he is a morally superior person, his son is powerless to stop this evil, and the novel depicts how the boy is reduced to the size of a small child as he crosses the street. However, McCarthy is of the opinion that no matter what the situation, it is always best to remain good in the face of evil. In conclusion, this paper shows McCarthy's *The Road* is heavily dependent on and constrained by moral qualities, human nature, and common human fears and needs when interpreted in the context of literary Darwinism. The conduct of this paper has associations with researchers, academics, and readers employed in collaborations with parenting and human morals.

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