The Double Death of Humanity in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

Stephen Joyce
The Double Death of Humanity in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

Stephen Joyce

1 The apocalypse is an ancient genre, yet the post-apocalyptic is relatively new. While the end of the world has been prophesized since at least the Book of Revelation, the first English-language novel to feature the survivors of a civilization-ending catastrophe was Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* in 1826. We may have had prior stories of lone survival, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, but in those cases the hero was cast out of civilization rather than civilization itself coming to an end. This sudden upsurge of popularity for seeing the decaying ruins of our world, a chief attraction of such post-apocalyptic films as *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2006), is one of the curious features of our age. For the medieval mind, the idea of surviving the apocalypse would have been absurd; with the apocalypse came the Last Judgment and the final sorting of humanity into saved and damned. For a narrative to begin with a human being after the apocalypse would be impossible. It is primarily with the dawn of the atomic age that post-apocalyptic fiction began to appear in significant numbers, yet even as Cold War fears have receded, the number of post-apocalyptic narratives across all media has only increased. The causes of the catastrophe have even multiplied beyond nuclear weapons to environmental destruction, meteors, plagues, AI, aliens, chemical warfare, and the ubiquitous zombie. That we can find so many reasons for the world to end suggests that the genre is evolving beyond specific fears and towards more intangible horrors. No post-apocalyptic work captures this better than Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

2 Rather than see McCarthy’s *The Road* as transforming the genre, I argue first that the post-apocalyptic genre has been evolving in directions that converge with the major themes of McCarthy’s oeuvre. It is no coincidence that McCarthy conceived a post-apocalyptic story at a time when the post-apocalypse was unusually prevalent in pop culture. The latent possibilities of the genre for existential questions only emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century. For specific socio-political reasons, the genre as practiced in the USA in particular began to be conceived as the antithesis of the classical...
apocalyptic narrative, opening the door to existential questions of meaning in a harsh, indifferent universe that McCarthy was able to explore with unparalleled depth in his seminal novel.

This article argues that the post-apocalyptic genre, with its profusion of not-quite human others such as zombies, mutants, and robots, has been groping its way toward a question that is central to *The Road*: what is the difference between human and inhuman? While the post-apocalyptic obviously deals with the near-extinction of humanity, it also explores the moral dimension implicit in words like “inhuman” and the degree to which this ethical valuation can survive in an altered environment. No text carries this question to such a horrifying extent as *The Road*, which strips life to a struggle for essentials in order to lay bare how the accretion of moral terms we ascribe to the word “humane” are merely products of our particular civilization. Humanity threatens to die in a double sense: as a species and as a positive moral value, and it is the latter that provokes the greater horror. Yet despite bringing us to the brink of this conclusion, I argue that McCarthy’s writing style ultimately encourages readers to reject it. First, I will look at the evolution of the post-apocalyptic genre before examining how the bare struggle for survival in the dismal world of the novel paves the way for existential questions about human nature, before finally looking at how the writing style itself urges readers to reject the novel’s nightmarish vision of humanity’s fragility.

The Post-Apocalyptic Genre

Although scholars have elucidated the relationship between *The Road* and McCarthy’s previous works such as *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Sunset Limited* (Palmer; Tyburski), its relationship to the post-apocalyptic requires clarification as the novel draws on the development of this genre in the early 2000s. To appreciate this development, we must first understand the appeal of the classical apocalyptic narrative and how the post-apocalyptic began to emerge as its antithesis. The rhetorical attraction of the apocalypse lies in the certainty that it creates for believers. History is an open narrative with manifold possibilities at each moment, only some of which are realized, but apocalyptic narratives allow us to “project ourselves... past the End, so as to see the structure whole” (Kermode 8). The apocalypse does not refer to the end of the world but to the revelation, the *aletheia*, that comes with seeing history from a God-like perspective, from a position outside of time where one can see the whole arc of history. This clarity also extends to the identity and purpose of all involved. Once you know the final pattern of history, you also know your own role in the drama. The dividing line between the saved and the damned has become clear. For Stephen D. O’Leary, this is one of the apocalypse’s central *topoi*, that “apocalyptic discourse functions as a symbolic theodicy, a mythical and rhetorical solution to the cosmic problem of evil” (“A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric” 407). With the apocalypse comes the Last Judgment, which purges the world of evil and prepares the way for the final victory of the good. These basic elements of the apocalyptic narrative—fixing the arc of history by projecting an imminent endpoint, dividing the world into good and evil, providing a sense of purpose and meaning to believers, and promising paradise once evil has been purged—have been used by diverse social movements to motivate their followers.

Stephen D. O’Leary goes further in defining two distinct frames: the tragic and comic apocalypse. In the comic frame, predictions of impending disaster are a warning designed
to trigger preventive measures in the present: “one can speak of impending catastrophe and yet remain within the assumptions of the comic frame, so long as the catastrophe is depicted as avoidable through human choice” (Arguing the Apocalypse 83). This approach is widespread in current environmental discourse and emphasizes the power of human beings to affect the future. As Jonathan Moo puts it, “the use of apocalyptic narratives to induce fear and wake people up to what is perceived as dangerous present reality or potential future catastrophe has a long pedigree in the environmental movement, dating back at least as far as ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’ in Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring” (939). In the comic frame, the apocalypse is a possible but not necessary outcome of current trends. In the tragic frame, to the contrary, nothing human beings can do will alter the course of history. “Tragic apocalyptic argument does not gain its urgency from any attempt to influence the outcome of events; rather, it seeks to orient its hearers into proper alignment toward cosmic forces locked in a titanic struggle with a predetermined outcome” (O’Leary, Arguing the Apocalypse 88). Common to both the comic and tragic frames, however, is a definite sense of meaning and purpose. History is approaching a climax and the duty of the listener in the present has been clearly defined.

6 The first major difference between the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres thus begins to emerge. The comic frame has been one of the primary uses of post-apocalyptic fiction, whether warning of the dangers of a nuclear holocaust as in A Canticle for Leibowitz (William Miller, 1960) or environmental catastrophe as in Earthworks (Brian Aldiss, 1965) or genetic experimentation as in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (2003). Specifying the cause of the disaster, and especially making it preventable by human effort, brings the comic frame of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic into alignment. But if the purpose of the tragic apocalypse is to bring audiences into proper relation to the coming end, the question is: what happens after the end? What meaning is left to one’s sense of identity and purpose, or to history itself? If we project ourselves beyond the end in the tragic frame, we find only the void and thus tragic post-apocalyptic narratives seem predisposed to raise the question of whether there is any meaning to individual life or human history.

7 These questions are latent within the genre, but the historical context also provides another force shaping the development of post-apocalyptic fiction. Over the past few decades, the rise of the religious right in the USA has brought apocalyptic thinking into mainstream culture. The bestselling Left Behind series of novels is essentially a fictionalized version of the evangelical Rapture; Hal Lindsey’s The Late Great Planet Earth has been a blockbuster since it was first published, despite repeatedly getting the date of the Rapture wrong. However, it was the George W. Bush administration’s use of apocalyptic rhetoric to characterize 9/11 that really provoked a cultural backlash. A devout evangelical, Bush consistently coded his speeches with Biblical rhetoric and sought to interpret the terrorist attacks as a turning point that revealed America’s purpose, clearly divided the world between good and evil, and would lead to a righteous purging of the forces of darkness. On September 14, 2001, Bush was already casting the attacks in terms of moral theology as an apocalyptic moment that had clarified world events and the USA’s role in them: “our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil... God’s signs are not always the ones we look for. We learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own” (60). In the manner of an evangelical pastor, Bush subtly indicated that the terrorist attacks needed to be interpreted as signs from God and thus the Bible was the key to decoding their
meaning. On October 7, 2001, he said, “the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places,” (75) thus referencing Revelation 6:15-17:

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” (emphasis mine)

Of course, an American audience would understand here that the Lamb’s surrogate is the USA, which is about to bring the wrath down on the evil men. From a rhetorical perspective, one has to admire how Bush double-coded his speech so that it would both reach a secular audience and carry extra weight for his evangelical base, which would spot the layered Biblical references. As Bruce Lincoln puts it: “this conversion of secular political speech into religious discourse invests otherwise merely human events with transcendent significance. By the end, America’s adversaries have been redefined as enemies of God and current events have been constituted as confirmation of scripture” (232).

What I would like to suggest is that this saturation of the body politic with apocalyptic rhetoric had a critical role in the development of the post-apocalyptic genre. As criticism of Bush mounted after the Iraq War and the Abu Ghraib scandal, the post-apocalyptic increasingly came to define itself in opposition to the messianic certainty and Manichaean worldview of apocalyptic rhetoric. Clarity and purpose are replaced by confusion and doubt, as in P.D. James’ The Children of Men. The destruction of civilization brings with it no revelation, nor has the world been purged of evil. Characters are often forced to commit immoral acts in order to survive, as happens repeatedly in The Walking Dead. In the landmark post-apocalyptic sci-fi series Battlestar Galactica (2003-9), we find a crucial piece of dialogue, broadcast months before the publication of The Road, which could have come from the mouth of any of Cormac McCarthy’s characters: "you said that humanity was a flawed creation and that people still kill one another for petty jealousy and greed. You said that humanity never asked itself why it deserved to survive. Maybe you don’t" (“Resurrection Ship Part II,” 2006). In exploring the inherent human capacity for evil and the existential question of meaning, the post-apocalyptic was converging with the major themes of Cormac McCarthy’s fiction. The Road is thus not simply an extension of McCarthy’s traditional concerns to the post-apocalyptic but a sign that the genre’s tragic frame had evolved into an apt vehicle for existentialist themes. The tragic frame enhances minor eschatology questions of how to survive day-to-day in a ruined world because the implicit question behind these ordinary acts is why one would want to survive at all.

**Minor Eschatology and the Existential Apocalypse**

From the perspective explained above, the emergence of ordinary chronicles of the end of the world can partly be seen as a shift from the comic to the tragic frame of the post-apocalyptic under the influence of specific cultural events. But this shift cannot simply be reduced to those events; rather, the events gave an impetus to new aspects of the genre which authors and media creators then expanded and developed. The internal logic of the tragic post-apocalyptic implies a world robbed of purpose because the end of the world provides no meaning to human civilization. This issue may best be emphasized
thematically through an intense focus on the difficulties of everyday survival because these difficulties underscore the wider existential question of why one would choose to exist in a world without meaning or purpose. Whereas the comic frame raises awareness of contemporary social and political issues by positing disaster if current trends continue, the tragic frame leads us to questions that are less political and more philosophical. This is partly what makes *The Road* such a seminal novel within the genre, because Cormac McCarthy is a major novelist who has spent years exploring and refining the existential ideas that emerge from the tragic frame. As Steven Frye argues in relation to McCarthy’s Southwestern novels:

For McCarthy, the frontier romance in all its historical scope is simply, or not so simply, a means to explore the human potential for violence, avarice, blindness, self-gratification, and depravity. The author infuses the genre with a philosophical content, using what begins as a popular form to enrich his characters both psychologically and ethically. (Frye 11)

Eric Carl Link sees the influence of American literary naturalism on his work, observing the shared features of “primitive, wild, or stripped-down environments and landscapes in which the mannerisms of polite and cultured civilizations are brushed aside and the elements of human nature more directly tied to the natural world itself are highlighted” (154). For Randall S. Wilhelm, in all McCarthy’s novels “the presence of evil is palpable and serves as a primal force in the world with which characters must in some way contend” (129). Such issues naturally emerge from the post-apocalyptic environment of *The Road*.

The key evidence for situating the novel in the tragic frame is that there is no explanation of the disaster that destroyed our civilization. The only direct references are the lines: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (45). Beyond that, there is the evidence of the world itself, suffering from what appears to be a nuclear winter. Yet the devastation could equally have been caused by a meteor or a chain of massive volcanic eruptions. McCarthy himself has explicitly stated that it doesn’t matter: “but it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important” (“Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy”). This has not stopped some critics from trying to pin the cause down to environmental destruction or nuclear holocaust, but as Kevin Kearney notes:

*The Road* continually frustrates our desire for symbolic closure. The point seems to be missed by critics who, in a search to present the novel as either an environmentally didactic text, cautioning us against abusing the globe by illustrating the collapse of the biosphere, or as a deterrent against nuclear proliferation, tend to “fill in the blanks,” so to speak, in order to provide symbolic resolution. (Kearney 164)

I would add that this desire to find the cause is motivated by an urge to shift the novel from a tragic to a comic frame. In the comic frame, knowing the impending reason for catastrophe would call for political action in the present, but it would also negate the questions that arise from the tragic frame and those are the questions McCarthy focuses on.

In place of a political or social message the novel concentrates on creating the feel of everyday life in this ruined environment. The gap between the story world and our own seems more salient in the tragic frame. The comic frame depends on a congruence between the post-apocalyptic world and our own so that we can make the appropriate analogies or observe the worst consequences of current trends; as the tragic frame in
McCarthy’s work is not concerned with political or social commentary, such analogies fit uneasily with *The Road*. As James Wood puts it, the novel “poses a simpler question, more taxing for the imagination and far closer to the primary business of fiction-making: what would this world without people look like, feel like?” (“Getting to the End”). This shifts our attention from big questions of “why?” to smaller questions of how an ordinary person would survive without the advantages of civilization in a fundamentally altered world. With an intensity emphasized on almost every page, four physical aspects of the world in *The Road* condition the lives of the characters and separate their world from our own: darkness, cold, barrenness, and hunger.

Right from the beginning, McCarthy makes it clear that this world is dominated by darkness, relieved only by an ashen daylight, “like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3). This is the first departure from our regular environment and one of the first we see affecting the man and the boy’s behavior. They come to a gas station and examine the pumps only to find them empty, ignoring “a metal barrel full of trash” (6). Instead they notice things that are no longer useful, a cash register, some old automotive manuals, a telephone. A quarter of a mile down the road the man comes to his senses and turns back to raid the trash for quart plastic oil bottles: “They sat in the floor decanting them of their dregs one by one, leaving the bottles to stand upside down draining into a pan until at the end they had almost a half quart of motor oil” (6). The painstaking, dull labor required for such little reward indicates their desperate need for fuel for their “little slutlamp” (7). In this post-apocalyptic world, even light is a struggle, something emphasized again in the diligent, extended account of the man crafting a new lamp (115). When the man explains that the purpose of a dam is to make electricity, the boy’s first response is “to make lights” (17), hinting at the boy’s almost pre-modern fascination with electricity’s first widespread function, the production of artificial light, rather than all the other wonders it enables. The contrast between the boy, who was born into this world, and the man, who was born in ours, provides much of the novel’s fascination. For the man, everything is an ashen grey emptiness, but for the boy this murk is the most light he has ever known and his vision has adapted accordingly:

> What do you see? the boy said.
> Nothing.
> He handed the binoculars across. The boy slung the strap over his neck and put them to his eyes and adjusted the wheel. Everything about them so still.
> I see smoke, he said.
> Where.
> Past those buildings.
> What buildings? (66-67)

Of course, the boy’s clarity of vision also has metaphorical implications. As Eric Pudney argues, “the boy is not blinded by the darkness of the world, because his innate goodness enables him to see clearly where others cannot” (322), but his eyesight also underscores the dimness to which the man cannot accustom himself.

Alongside the gloom is the cold. Throughout the novel, the man and the boy must struggle against the incessant chill and the threat of death by exposure. When the novel opens they are heading south because “there’d be no surviving another winter here” (4). Like light, warmth is a hard-won commodity involving arduous labor: “They collected firewood from the north side of the slope where it was not so wet, pushing over whole trees and dragging them into camp” (30). Hypothermia is a constant threat. As the man warns the boy when he leaves him to find firewood, “Dont lie down. If you lie down you’ll...
fall asleep and then if I call you you wont answer and I wont be able to find you” (61). Blankets become so valuable that the man will take them even from corpses, despite the “remnants of rotted hair on the pillow” and the smell of “damp and rot” (68). In The Road, the apocalypse is signaled on every page by the crushing absence of those essentials we control today with the flick of a switch but which in this world require either hours of work to create from scratch or the violation of taboos surrounding death.

The third major feature of this world is its barrenness, which McCarthy frequently describes in sentences lacking active verbs, removing any possibility of action or change. “Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind” (7). There are barely any signs of growth or life. With nothing left of the natural world except stone and ash, the man and the boy must scavenge what is left of our civilization. It is only the remnants of our world that give this world some sense of individuality and character. The fragments of our culture, absent of any political commentary, create an oddly archaic, elegiac effect. It is tempting to see such elements as the shopping cart as critiques of consumer capitalism, yet there is no persistent evidence that McCarthy intends to critique our culture by showing it in ruins. Instead, these features seem to suggest the futility of all human meanings in the face of death: “Odd things scattered by the side of the road. Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago” (168). The novel’s descriptions of now useless objects are integral to the sensation of emptiness. The presence of things underscores the absence of people who could make them meaningful. Hence there are numerous passages which consist largely of lists of objects: “They trucked along the blacktop. Tall clapboard houses. Machinerolled metal roofs. A log barn in a field with an advertisement in ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City” (18). The flat quality of such descriptions fills the novel with a quiet sense of desolation. The apocalypse in The Road does not happen with lurid visions of firestorms and panic. Instead it is seen in the isolation of objects from the contexts that gave them meaning.

The conditions of the world condemn survivors to scavenge constantly for food. Only once do they find something growing, some mushrooms, “a small colony of them, shrunken, dried and wrinkled” (34), but otherwise nature is barren. Early on, when the boy optimistically asks if there are fish in the lake, the man replies without hesitation, “there’s nothing in the lake” (17). The finality of his words suggests the years of frustration and disappointment scouring the natural world for a source of food. In the absence of anything that can be grown, everything the man and boy eat must be a piece of tinned or dried food, well past their sell-by date with all the attendant risks of food poisoning: “In the pantry were three jars of homecanned tomatoes. He blew the dust from the lids and studied them. Someone before him had not trusted them and in the end neither did he” (19). The quiet use of “in the end” subtly implies how long the man stared at this meagre food, trying to rationalize the risk of eating it. The hunger of the man and the boy is often acute, but, as with their search for light and warmth, this hunger is indicated chiefly by the lengths they will go to in order to find what they need and their struggles prepare the reader for the horrors other survivors are willing to inflict on each other.

As the man and the boy journey down the road, their biggest fear is not of the cold or the dark or of hunger but of other survivors. When they encounter a member of a road gang, the man kills him and afterwards thinks: “The reptilian calculations in those cold and
shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh” (64). Cannibalism has become a way of life now that there is no food, but this is only the beginning of the horror. Worse is found in the locked cellar of a house: “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. Jesus, he whispered” (93). With human beings now turned into livestock and eaten piece by piece while still alive to keep the meat fresh, it seems there is no more depravity that McCarthy can throw at us, but there are always new depths to plumb. Further on down the road, they spy three men and a pregnant woman, “all of them wretched looking beyond description” (165). Yet the idea of pregnancy and birth offers a glimmer of hope until the man and the boy discover their camp and a “charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (167). Again and again readers are confronted with behavior we would consider inhuman in ways that ask us to rethink what human nature really is. As Randall Wilhelm asks, “In a world bereft of order, without the civilizing structures of generations of human history, a world seemingly in its last stages of existence, what should be the ethical behavior of a human being—to himself, to others, to higher humanistic or spiritual values?” (133). This question dominates the tragic frame of the post-apocalyptic: not why catastrophe occurred but what it means to be human when the civilization that structures our ethical beliefs has vanished.

In this desperate environment, the issue is not simply how to survive but why one would want to survive. This is starkly articulated by the man’s wife, who chooses suicide because there is no reason to live any more:

> We used to talk about death, she said. We don’t any more. Why is that?
> I don’t know.
> It’s because it’s here. There’s nothing left to talk about. (48)

The brutal choice between simply dying or suffering and dying pervades the novel. It is the question that haunts the father throughout the story and which he struggles to answer. If there’s no future for the boy, why should there even be a present?

It’s within this context that Phillip Snyder argues for an ethic of hospitality derived from the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida: “her suicide demonstrates, according to Levinasian and Derridean notions of subjectivity, that when one loses the sense of responsibility to the Other, one also loses one’s self” (“Hospitality” 76). This reading illuminates the central dilemma of the text, which is how we can relate to others in a world of overwhelming necessity, where relationships burden one with impossible demands and every stranger is a competitor for dwindling supplies. However, Derrida’s proposed solution, an ethic of absolute hospitality that demands an unlimited ethical obligation to the other, seems especially problematic in the world of *The Road*. As Susan Sencindiver asks, “is absolute hospitality practically feasible? The conditions of reality will unavoidably fall short of actualizing the ideal of unconditional hospitality” (23). Even Derrida acknowledged that absolute hospitality was an ideal that was intended to temper conditional laws of hospitality, “without which the unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire” (Sencindiver 23). In a world in which conditional laws and customs of hospitality have collapsed, Snyder’s conclusion seems suspect: “As long as there is one person left alive in the world, one ‘last host in Christendom,’ there will be hospitality, as he or she awaits the coming of an unexpected, surprising Messiah who must be welcomed with the mad declaration, ‘Here I
am!” (“Hospitality” 85). Given that most of the people the man and boy meet on the road are cannibals, declaring “Here I am!” would indeed seem mad. There seems no way to resolve the dilemma. The man is dying and he knows the boy cannot survive alone, but what hope is there when other people are the threat from which he must be saved?

This question leads us away from Levinas and into the realm of existentialist philosophy. The connection between existentialism and The Road has been noted by Alan Noble, who states that “in the typescript copy of the first draft of The Road […] McCarthy wrote a note which implies that the novel might have a specific philosophical source: “‘(Kierkegaard: Abraham and Isaac)’” (Noble 94). In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard discusses the problem of Abraham, who is trapped in the ethical duty to protect his son and his absolute duty to serve God when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac. The solution to this dilemma is faith, which allows Abraham to move beyond infinite resignation to a paradoxical belief that he will carry out the sacrifice God has asked of him because God will ultimately not ask it of him: “he believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it was indeed absurd that God, who demanded it of him, in the next instant would revoke the demand” (Kierkegaard 29). In The Road, it is not God but the ruined world that demands the man kill his son despite his ethical duty to protect him. The father repeatedly asks himself “can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?” (24) even though “my job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God” (65). In the end, despite all the horrors they have experienced, the father makes the leap of faith that the boy’s life may yet be worth living, even though nothing of the world depicted makes this believable: “I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant… you’re going to be lucky. I know you are” (235). As Noble puts it, “in an inversion of Abraham’s test of faith, the father in The Road must make the absurd and unethical decision to preserve the life of his son” (103).

Yet what distinguishes this choice from Kierkegaard is that the novel is not invoking religious faith alone. Although Christian themes run throughout the text, there is no affirmation that there is a God to whom one can appeal. As the blind wanderer Ely cryptically remarks, “there is no God and we are his prophets” (143). The destruction of the Earth may be taken as the final proof that there is no benevolent deity watching over us, in which case the man’s leap of faith must be cast in purely human terms. This shifts the novel’s themes from Christianity and towards the existentialism of Albert Camus, who argued that if one cannot have faith in God, it is still possible to have faith in humanity: “I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one” (28). Yet this is where the real horror of The Road emerges. In every post-apocalyptic narrative, whatever else remains of our world, humanity always continues to exist. In The Road, it is not just that light, warmth, nature, and food have ceased to exist but alongside them humanity is also disappearing, leaving the man with nothing in which to have faith.

The double horror of The Road is not simply the end of humanity but the annihilation of the set of moral values we assign to humanity whenever we declare an act “humane” or “inhuman” or commend someone for their “humanity”: generosity, love, kindness. The post-apocalyptic genre is commonly peopled with not-quite human creatures, but these can be seen as gestures towards the disturbing suggestion in The Road that the survivors of the apocalypse will no longer be human because what we mean by “human” is a construct of our civilization and once that civilization is gone so too will all the innate morality we like to ascribe to ourselves. Throughout the post-apocalyptic genre we find...
intimations of such a possibility; in Richard Matheson’s *I am Legend*, for example, the protagonist notes that “morality, after all, had fallen with society. He was his own ethic” (50). Yet *The Road* surpasses any other text in exploring the horror of this idea.

One of the novel’s most unsettling developments in this regard is our increasing questioning of the man’s moral behavior. Inger-Anne Søfting has written that “[t]he novel’s two characters, a father and his son, are as truly ‘the good guys’ as the landscape surrounding them is ‘the bad land’” (705), but other critics have questioned to what extent we can identify the man as a moral agent. Is ordinary morality even possible after the apocalypse? In the man’s encounters with the road gangs, his violence seems justified by their appalling cruelty. However, later in the novel the father treats other isolated survivors with brutal harshness. When a lone man steals their possessions, the father does not simply reclaim them butpunishes him by taking the man’s clothes, leaving him to die of exposure. The man pleads with him to at least leave him his clothes:

You tried to kill us.
I’m starving, man. You’d have done the same.
You took everything.
Come on, man. I’ll die.
I’m going to leave you the way you left us.
Come on. I’m begging you. (217)

Finally, the boy prevails on his father to go back and return the clothes, but the man has disappeared into “the empty dusk” (219). Serving a death sentence on those who threaten you seems to be the only way to stay safe in a world without institutions or ethics. A few pages later a man with a bow shoots the father through the leg with an arrow. “Oh you bastard, he said. You bastard” (221) he mutters and kills him with a flare gun. In the man’s quest to protect the boy he becomes almost indistinguishable from “the bad guys” he continually warns his son against. The road gangs justify their actions in the name of survival; the man justifies his actions in the name of his son’s survival. The difference becomes increasingly small as the novel progresses.

The tragic form of the post-apocalyptic pushes us to ask if there is anything of humanity in human nature, once the trappings of our comfortable civilization are stripped away. It is easy to be generous when living near well-stocked supermarkets; in a barren world, how quickly would our higher ideals vanish? This is why the boy’s natural altruism is such a miracle and why he seems so unfit for survival. The man knows this, yet he takes his own leap of faith at the end that there may be a future for the boy, even though no one and nothing they have encountered justifies this belief. Kierkegaard found relief from infinite resignation in religious faith, while Camus found a humanistic equivalent by substituting a common human nature for God; but McCarthy removes even that and asks us to have faith that there is more to human nature than the bare animal striving for survival and dominance he has repeatedly exposed in *The Road*. The ordinary details of survival in a post-apocalyptic world are thus the concrete ground on which a major philosophical question is erected.

**The Style of Hope**

What is it, though, that prompts readers to accept the man’s decision to spare his son, despite the horror of the world in which he must now survive alone? As Eric Pudney writes:
Instead of providing a rational, practical answer (the kind of answer the man has demanded all the way through the novel), the reader is asked to accept on faith that the boy will survive, because he deserves to. In other words, the reader is asked to make the same leap of faith as the boy’s father has, despite the crushing weight of the evidence of all that has happened so far. (305)

Some have taken issue with the abruptly happy ending, in which the first person the boy meets after his father’s death is one of “the good guys” who adopts the boy into his family. Allen Josephs asks, “why drag out a deliberate and undisguised deus ex machina—no one could seriously argue that McCarthy was unaware of the fact—if what you want to do is deny any sort of deus?” (27). Alan Noble questions, “how can readers reconcile the ending, which is hopeful about the future, with the fatalism that dominates the text?” (93). If the world of The Road challenges us to believe the boy could survive, why have millions of readers so readily accepted the ending and made the same leap of faith that there is more to humanity than King Lear’s “poor, bare, forked animal”?

It is here, I think, that the style of The Road plays a critical role. McCarthy is justly famous for his beautiful prose, but in The Road the writing style continually asks the reader to posit a basic faith in the pair’s humanity, thus subtly preparing the reader for the novel’s conclusion. Philip and Delys Snyder in an article on McCarthy’s writing argue that The Road represents “the unplugged, stripped-down acoustic version of his style” (36). The grammatically incomplete sentences reflect a world frozen in its dying state. However, the pared down language does more than simply express the post-apocalyptic environment; it also suggests that language, as a human construct, is disappearing, for how can a human construct survive where humanity cannot?

He tried to think of something to say but could not. He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colours. 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. (103)

In such a world, language becomes increasingly skeletal, but this does not make it devoid of feeling. One of the things that causes us to reject a pessimistic reading of human nature in the novel is McCarthy’s consistent use of Hemingway’s iceberg technique. As Hemingway explained in an interview for the Paris Review, “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show” (“The Art of Fiction” 88). The debt to Hemingway is made explicit when the feverish man thinks of “a grey day in a foreign city… it had begun to rain and a cat at the corner turned and crossed the sidewalk and sat beneath the café awning. There was a woman at a table there with her head in her hands” (157), the extended memory a clear reference to Hemingway’s famous “Cat in the Rain” (1926). Throughout The Road, McCarthy employs the iceberg technique to prompt the reader to read emotions and thoughts into bare descriptions, thus asking us to invest the characters with a humanity that a literal reading of the text does not imply.

The character for whom this has the most disturbing implications is the boy, for while we are often privy to the man’s thoughts, the boy’s mind remains closed to us until the final pages. There are times when he responds to sights or events with a coldness that is potentially shocking. Early in the novel they find a barn: “Inside the barn three bodies
hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light. There could be something here, the boy said. There could be corn or something. Let’s go, the man said” (18). The corpses don’t seem to bother the boy; they are simply a part of his world, like ruined buildings, like ash. It is the man who seems affected by them and leaves before they can properly search the barn for food. Their dialogues also contain moments when the boy’s refrain of “Okay” takes on horrifying dimensions:

They’re going to eat them, aren’t they?
Yes.
And we couldn’t help them because then they’d eat us too.
Yes.
And that’s why we couldn’t help them.
Yes.
Okay. (148-9)

35 The lack of commentary on the dialogue opens up the prospect that “okay” at the end of this litany of horror is simply an uncritical acceptance of the terrifying reality the boy has just described, like a child learning the rules for crossing a road. This nightmare is his everyday life and we cannot expect what we consider ordinary human responses from him.

However, as readers, we struggle to experience The Road in such a manner. Reading the man and the boy’s actions and dialogues literally would be highly disturbing. We need to believe there is a human consciousness like ours behind their actions, a consciousness not manifested by most of the people they encounter. Consider how chilling the novel would be if McCarthy had written scenes from the perspective of the woman who cooked her own infant or the people who kept half-eaten human beings as food reserves in the basement: the same flat descriptions, the lack of commentary on the dialogue, their actions monstrous and incomprehensible. But when it comes to the man and the boy we need to imagine them as having what we think of as human nature. The iceberg technique in The Road consistently asks us to read human thought processes into their actions and thus prepares the reader for the man’s unjustifiable hope that the boy can have a future. Although the events of the novel imply that there is no humanity left, the style encourages us to reach the opposite conclusion.

This underscores the importance of stories within the narrative, the “old stories of courage and justice” (35) that the man tells the boy throughout their journey. As Russell M. Hillier argues, “the man clings to his humanity by making moral sense of his new world through his literary inheritance from the old world” (671). When they meet Ely, for example, the man objects to helping him while the boy asks if they can give him something to eat. The father pauses: “He stood looking off down the road. Damn, he whispered. He looked down at the old man. Perhaps he’d turn into a god and they to trees. All right, he said” (137). At the moment of decision, the man recalls the ancient story of Baucis and Philemon from Ovid and makes the humane choice. It is the old tale that prompts the leap, not rational calculation. Likewise, it is through stories that the boy develops a moral sense that allows him to criticize his father’s actions. After they have left the thief for dead and killed the man who attacked them with the bow and arrow, the boy says he doesn’t want to hear any more stories because “in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (225). Yet it is only from the stories that the boy can learn a concept of morality independent of his father that allows him to reach such a judgment. If the style of The Road pushes us to believe there is a human nature behind the bare words, then the narrative asks us to believe that the act of storytelling
itself is the source of our humanity and that simply by picking up a copy of the book we have already taken the necessary step to imagine that the boy’s goodness can survive.

Conclusion

Although most approaches to The Road situate it primarily in relation to McCarthy’s previous work, we should recognize the possibilities that emerge within the post-apocalyptic genre that McCarthy developed using his own unique style. First, the tragic mode of the post-apocalyptic lends itself to existentialist questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence. Whereas the comic mode of both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature can be seen as a warning to the present, the tragic mode of the post-apocalyptic can no longer rely on an ending to provide meaning to history; the end has already happened, leaving the survivors in a brutal, meaningless world. Second, the shift to the tragic frame also focuses attention on the here and now of the story world rather than on drawing parallels with our time. The Road’s effect is so intense because McCarthy never lets us forget the conditions in which the man and the boy must survive. He is not interested in what sort of political structures may emerge in the ruins of the world; each page is primarily concerned with how people would stay warm, find food, and avoid a violent death and the pair’s exertions to achieve even the most basic comforts emphasize the harshness of the daily struggle. This prompts existential questions about what human civilization was all for and what a person could make of life in its absence, questions that have always been latent within the post-apocalyptic genre and that McCarthy has explored elsewhere. Finally, The Road helps us to see that the variety of mutants, zombies, and fantastic creatures in post-apocalyptic fiction are not simply standard tropes of sci-fi and fantasy but a recognition that what we mean by humanity is a product of our civilization. This idea has been explored before in novels such as I am Legend, but McCarthy raises them to a new pitch in The Road through the combination of his appalling images of savagery and the beauty of his spartan prose. If the encounters with other humans on the road try to convince us that this bestiality is all that being human really is, then the alchemy of the writing style pushes us to reject such a conclusion and believe that there is more to the bare words, that as long as we have the capacity to tell stories there must be something of humanity still, despite all that has been lost. As the father puts it, in what could be seen almost as a justification for the novel itself: “It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something” (227).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited


HILLIER, Russell M. “‘Each the Other’s World Entire’: Intertextuality and the Worth of Textual Remembrance in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road.” English Studies, vol. 96, no. 6, 2015, p. 670-689.


Films:


ABSTRACTS

This article situates Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) within the tragic frame of post-apocalyptic narratives as they began to develop in the USA in response to the Bush administration’s messianic belief in 9/11 as a form of apocalyptic moment. Whereas the comic frame of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres posits a catastrophe that could be prevented by human actions in the present, the tragic frame of the post-apocalyptic posits a situation in which the end of the world has provided no overarching meaning to human history. This leads to an intense focus on how individuals would survive, a minor eschatology that concentrates on the day-to-day struggle for life in a ruined world, in order to raise existentialist
questions of why anyone would want to survive in a meaningless universe and what it means to be human when the civilization that structured our understanding of that term has passed away. However, the bleak pessimism of the narrative world and the disturbing suggestion that humanity has been wiped out not just as a species but as a moral quality is offset by McCarthy’s prose style, which encourages readers to reject nihilistic perspectives and accept the unlikely optimism that concludes the novel.

Cet article entend situer The Road de Cormac McCarthy (2006) dans le cadre tragique des narrations post-apocalyptiques qui se sont développées aux Etats-Unis, sous l’ère Bush, en réponse à une forme de messianisme qui voyait dans le 11 septembre un moment apocalyptique. Tandis que le cadre comique du genre apocalyptique et post-apocalyptique postule une catastrophe qui pourrait être évitée dans le présent par l’action humaine, le postulat tragique du post-apocalyptique est que la fin du monde a privé l’histoire humaine de toute signification. De là l’intérêt aigu porté à la survie des individus, et le développement d’une eschatologie mineure qui se concentre sur la lutte pour la vie, au jour le jour, dans un monde en ruines. S’ensuit également un questionnement existentiel: pourquoi survivre dans un univers privé de sens? que signifie être humain, quand la civilisation même qui a structuré notre compréhension de ce terme n’est plus? Pourtant, le pessimisme qui habite la diégèse, le trouble qui ne manque pas de surgir à la suggestion que l’humanité a été anéantie non seulement en tant qu’espèce mais aussi en tant que qualité morale, trouve une contrepartie dans le style de McCarthy, qui encourage les lecteurs à rejeter le nihilisme et accepter l’optimisme qui, contre toute vraisemblance, vient clôre le roman.

INDEX

Mots-clés: post-apocalyptic, apocalypse, tragic, 9/11, existentialism

Keywords: post-apocalyptic, apocalypse, tragic, 9/11, existentialism

AUTHOR

STEPHEN JOYCE

Aarhus University, Denmark