

**AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO CORMAC MCCARTHY'S
*THE ROAD***

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Abstract

Frederick Jameson once said that imagining the continuing deterioration of the earth and of nature seems easier for us than imagining the collapse of capitalism. Nevertheless, the act of imagining plausible consequences of our actions on environment is arguably one of the most efficient ways of raising awareness about environmental problems in order to propel us to make changes in our lifestyles that would accommodate a sustainable future. In envisioning possible scenarios about the future of earth, literature and literary imagination unquestionably play prominent roles. Likewise, “survival” of the species, especially survival of the humankind plays an important role in thinking about the future of the world. Since we “love ourselves best of all” as David Ehrenfeld says, a literary work’s success in evoking a sense of extinction may shake us from our ungrounded beliefs that things will be all right in the future. Therefore, this essay argues that in overcoming such conflicting attitudes, post-apocalyptic narratives could play a great part in preventing a future disaster that is already underway by creating a sense of crisis. The first part of the essay focuses on literature’s relationship with environmental problems and elaborates on how post-apocalyptic fiction contributes to the task of raising public awareness. The second part of the essay explores the relationship between *The Road* and the aforementioned genre and elaborates on the grounds and outcomes of the centrality of “the road” and sources of energy such as food and oil in the novel by focusing on the novel’s critique of over-consumerist culture and it investigates the authorial intentions of McCarthy.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic fiction, eco-criticism, Cormac McCarthy, the Road, resource fiction, globalization

Introduction

toxic waste, poison air, beach goo, eroded roads draw nations together, whereas magnanimous platitudes and sweet semblance ease each nation back into its comfort or despair: global crises promote internationalist gettings-together, problems the best procedure
Garbage A.R. Ammons, *Garbage*

It has become a fact of our lives that the national economies have become more and more globalized in the last century. While the globalization may not be a new phenomenon for the modern times and one can trace its roots back to the Neolithic times as Eric Wolfe suggests (qtd. in Jameson 54), the dizzying force with which it has transformed the modern life has been unprecedented. Doubtlessly the importance of oil as a product and capital is undeniable in this process of globalization. Enabling transportation to the outermost corners of the world, oil has been one of the major factors accelerating and strengthening globalism. A central emblem of contemporary economics, oil has become indispensable in our lives as many critics suggest. Ryszard Lapuscinski explains its growing impact in our lives as such:

Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free, it expresses the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through a lucky accident... in this sense it is a fairy tale, and like all fairy tales a bit of a lie (qtd. in Retort 40).

While oil has facilitated our lives and connected far away places, our dependence on oil nevertheless has been more or less the source of numerous major problems and anxieties we have experienced in this global era. While the need to procure ever-growing amounts of oil has given rise to neoimperialistic powers and led to oil wars, as Michael K. Walonen suggests our dependency has also had major impact on the environment, from global warming to oil spills and water pollution, affecting “the basic social and spatial conditions of the people throughout the world” (57). If one thinks about the conditions that societies operate, majority of the things we consume in our daily lives from food to basic daily tools comes to our homes through the transportation that oil has enabled in the first place. As the need for oil becomes more and more pronounced and the sources diminishing, many scenarios as to how to avert an economical crisis at the end of oil has become a central issue. Considering the fact that our dependency does not allow for any flexibility, in the event that oil levels may not fulfill consumer demand, the need to think about the future of oil has become one of our priorities and has led to numerous crisis narratives. Szeman explains the reason behind these narratives as such:

Oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond. Oil and capital are linked inextricably, so much so that the looming demise of the petrochemical economy has come to constitute perhaps the biggest disaster that “we” collectively face. The success of capital is dependent on continuous expansion, which enables not only profit taking but investment in the reproduction of capital that is a necessary condition for its continuation on into the future (806-07).

Since it is apparent that one day the oil industry will reach Hubbert’s peak, and oil levels will decline, these narratives tend to offer strategies that could hopefully prolong the inevitable end of oil. Szeman identifies three major narratives concerning the end of oil: Strategic Realism, Techno-utopianism and apocalyptic environmentalism (808). He argues that while the former two

discourses focus on the economical consequences of the end of oil, apocalyptic environmentalism approaches the oil problem from an environmental perspective by analyzing our consumption levels and the disastrous impact it has on the nature. Motivated by the belief that maintenance of our present consumer culture would not sustain a healthy future environment, it aims to form a new economical system by using scientific data to inform the public and thus transform our consumer behavior (816). Noting that it is the “flow of money” that has made the environment what it is today, David Harvey also suggests that environmental transformations are always transformations of social relations (335). One can argue that the need to inform and transform social consciousness and behavior about the future of environment has become a project of utmost importance in an era that has witnessed our growing dependence on this omnipresent yet limited source of energy despite its hazardous impacts on ecology.

Frederick Jameson once said that imagining the continuing deterioration of the earth and of nature seems easier for us than imagining collapse of capitalism (qtd. in Szeman 820). Yet the act of imagining plausible consequences of our actions on environment is arguably one of the most efficient ways of raising awareness about environmental problems in order to propel us to make changes in our lifestyles that would accommodate a sustainable future. In envisioning possible scenarios about the future of earth, literature and literary imagination unquestionably play prominent roles. As many critics suggest literature has the potential of evoking different emotions about nature in the reader. A critic explains the significance of environmental imagination relating to the issues of ecology as such:

They may connect readers vicariously with others’ experience, suffering, pain: that of nonhumans as well as humans. They may reconnect readers with places they have been and send them where they would otherwise never physically go. They may direct thought toward alternative futures. And they may affect one’s caring for the physical world: make it more or less precious or endangered or disposable. All this may befall a moderately attentive reader reading about a cherished, abused, or endangered place (Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* 2).

As Buell’s comment suggests environmental imagination can create a connection between individual and nature and can present much talked about yet unresolved environmental problems in a much more influential way. In doing so, science fiction and its sub-genre post-apocalyptic fiction has been one of the most utilized forms of environmental imagination. The popularity of these genres as outlets of environmental imagination is hardly a coincidence. Although, as a concept, fiction provides a space where imagination can run wild, the saying finds its own apex in post-apocalyptic narratives. It is common to see this genre operating on a political agenda by presenting authors an opportunity to write about any world of their own liking. Inviting comparisons between the present world and the fictional world of a novel, it has the potential of propelling the reader to actively meditate on the environmental problems of today.

Although, in modern times humankind has witnessed many threats to environment, much of which has come into being as a result of its greedy capitalistic tendencies, such as oil spills, global warming, extinction of plant and animal species, depletion of the ozone layer and acid rains, it still has a nonchalant and anesthetized viewpoint about the world’s ecological future absorbed in its economical activities for personal gain. Theodore Roszak observes that:

We have an ecological style whose dynamism is too great, too fast, too reckless for ecological systems that must absorb its impact... The problem the biosphere confronts is the convergence of all urban-industrial economies as

they thicken and coagulate into a single planet-wide system everywhere devoted to maximum productivity and the unbridled assertion of human dominance (33).

Pointing out the global nature of world economics, Roszak emphasizes the need to adopt better policies. However, despite the consequences of our actions on environment, we still continue to live under the illusion that an environmental crisis is somewhat a creation of imagination, a thing that can only happen in literature or in movies. As Szeman suggests a large number of people believe that if one day environmental problems reach an insurmountable degree, the highly sophisticated technology and science of the future will take care of it (814). Attitudes like this imply that our capitalistic hubris abstains us from radically engaging with environmental problems lest we might have to change our comfortable lifestyles and consumer habits. However, it is apparent that the environmental problems do not go away or solve themselves while we continue to ignore them.

In thinking about the future of the world, “survival” of species, especially survival of the humankind plays an important role. Since we “love ourselves best of all” as David Ehrenfeld says, a literary work’s success in evoking a sense of extinction may shake us from our ungrounded beliefs that things will be all right in the future (qtd. in Love 226). Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination* states that creating images of doom to avert doom could play an important part in evoking a sense of environmental consciousness (295). Therefore, I would argue that in overcoming such conflicting attitudes, post-apocalyptic narratives could play a great part in preventing a future disaster that is already underway by creating a sense of crisis.

Cormac McCarthy’s last novel *The Road* presents a good example of a post-apocalyptic fiction discussed above. Celebrated by George Monbiot to be the most important environmental book ever written, *The Road* narrates the journey of a father and son in a post-apocalyptic decimated world, bereft of natural life and regeneration. Under the points discussed above, this study aims to focus on McCarthy’s novel and discuss the ways in which it succeeds as a piece of environmental imagination. The first part of the essay will focus on literature’s relationship with environmental problems and will elaborate on how post-apocalyptic fiction contributes to the task of raising public awareness. The second part of the essay will explore the relationship between *The Road* and the aforementioned genre and will elaborate on the grounds and outcomes of the centrality of “the road” and sources of energy such as food and oil in the novel by focusing on the novel’s critique of over-consumerist culture and it will investigate the authorial intentions of McCarthy.

Post-Apocalyptic Novel and Environmentalism

When I submit these thoughts to a printing press, I am helping to drain a marsh for cows to graze, and to exterminate the birds of Brazil. When I go birding in my Ford, I am devastating an oil field, and re-electing an imperialist to get me rubber.

Aldo Leopold, “Game and Wild Life Conservation”

Many ecocritics have pointed out that literature, especially novel as a literary form has been slow to respond environmental issues. According to Dominic Head, the problem stems from the fact that, novel as a literary device has traditionally been used to focus on personal development and social life rather than environmental crisis. Arguing that novel’s tendency to focus on the social, which has been increasingly concentrated on urban spaces, creates a disjunction with and alienation from nature, Head emphasizes the need for an “appropriating novelistic form”, one that

calls for the imagination and discussion of environmental problems (236). In a similar fashion, Richard Kerridge argues that the problem stems from the time-span limitations of realist novel. He states that thinking about environmental problems requires thinking beyond here and there and calls for the questioning of the long-term impacts of our present actions (243-44). Since realist novel has conventionally chosen to deal with the individual and been celebrated for the detailed treatment and observation of the social, Kerridge suggests that it undergoes some difficulties dealing with the environmental issues:

For the readers in the West, environmental issues are much more the stuff of potentiality than of actuality: tomorrow rather than now, elsewhere rather than here, a crisis building rather than crisis reached. Because of their intangibility, such matters can always be postponed; set aside, for now, in the face of more pressingly immediate and familiar demands. Their very reality is constantly in question. Their elusiveness poses problems of representation which the realistic novel has scarcely begun to address (244).

Kerridge says that the problem has been partially overcome by another genre, the ecothriller. However, he argues that the genre's obsession of happy endings which is usually fueled by "Christian narratives of ordeal and redemption" may undermine the gravity of environmental problems by giving some sense of "false reassurance" that the problems may eventually be overcome and things will be alright (245-46). One can argue that this, in return could reduce its impact of the genre as an environmental project, the impact of which comes from its effectiveness in propelling its audience to imagine a grim world in all its potentiality, usually caused by the ill deeds of the humankind itself.

The subversive use of novel by McCarthy in *The Road* transcends many issues of the science fiction genre depicted by these critics. While the novel has certain allusions to Christian mythology, these allusions mainly function as poignant reminders of the past times and have a ritualistic yet hollow quality. Also the ambiguous ending of the novel refuses the readers' expectations to be reassured and gives the impression that once the nature is destroyed there is no turning back or a regeneration process. But most importantly the success of the book as a post-apocalyptic fiction comes from its successful evocation of a post-natural world in which no living entity will be able to survive for long. Even though it takes place in a specific location with the father and the child traveling through the ex-state roads of the US, the novel on the whole manages to evoke a sense of universality about the destruction of the nature. Despite taking place in particular geographical terrains, the novel successfully moves from the micro settings to macro and gives the urgency and universality of the doom in some of its key passages such as the scene where the man and the child imagine about another pair of a father and a son looking at the ocean from the other side of the world and then realize the impossibility of it (231), and the concluding passage in the novel which reminds the reader that what is once destroyed cannot be reclaimed again. I would argue that this aspect of the novel provides it an eco-global side which in our times proves quite important when it comes to thinking about environmental issues on a global level. Lawrence Buell suggests that thinking "environmentally" or "ecologically" calls for a point of view that is "against" or "beyond" national thinking since "jurisdictional borders seldom correspond to ecological borders" ("Ecoglobalist Affects" 227). Especially in times when our problems have become as much as globalized as our economies, and environmental crises building up more and more everyday, it is important to know that environmental problems know no borders. As an efficient way of stimulating public imagination and problem solving, post apocalypticism of *The Road*, gives the novel an eco-global edge, creating the sense that at this global age what happens at

one part of the world has an impact on another place despite miles of distance. Furthermore, by emphasizing the delicate balance between animal, plant and human life it questions whether human life is possible in the absence of the other two and seems to suggest a midway between anthropocentric and ecocentric arguments of our time.

The Road also overcomes the problem Head argues to exist in realist novel's encounters with environmental issues. Genre-fiction at its best, *The Road* creates a realistic world in which we see the social life reduced to its basic elements in its portrayal of the father and the son. Yet arguing that they are the center-piece of the novel would be wrong, considering novel's portrayal of the nature which almost emerges as the third protagonist. One can argue that this balance between human life and nature in the novel, a hard one to accomplish, has been assisted by the fact that majority of the humankind has been wiped out by the apocalypse itself, therefore evoking the sense that when there is little to no human life left in the world that could no longer regenerate, the values that the society are based upon lose all their meaning and the survival of what is left takes over. However, by making it clear that overall survival in the novel is out of the question, the novel underlines the importance of nature once again.

Furthermore, the fact that the reason behind the apocalypse remains unknown yet imaginable due to the novel's overall critique of the contemporary over-consumerist culture exacerbates the universality of our present environmental problems and demands some critical thinking from the reader about the capitalistic hubris and greed of our times. The novel, presenting the monuments of our age such as roads, supermarkets and billboards in their intact shapes while making it clear that their consumers are dead, creates an uncanny atmosphere about the novel. Invoking Jameson's idea that world may end but capitalism will survive, the novel seems to suggest our dependency on the things we create might one day bring our doom if we continue living without thinking about the environmental consequences of our actions.

In an interview with David Kushner, Cormac McCarthy declared that although he had not given the reason of the apocalypse in *The Road*, he believed that it would be the humankind who would bring the world to its end, considering the growing amount of violence and environmental crisis we came across everyday (7). One can argue that his authorial choice to focus on the decimated world itself by leaving the reason of apocalypse to reader's imagination forces the reader to become a part of this environmental imagination project by prompting it into realizing that our present day actions might cause such a catastrophe either gradually by our recklessness or suddenly by our violent ways. Commenting on the importance of apocalyptic narratives, a critic asserts that by utilizing imagination, the narrative of apocalypticism give the sense that "the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis" (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 285). In the face of the world's amnesiac and irresponsible attitudes towards ecological issues, an understanding of its assumptions and values, and the re-acknowledgment of the unique balance of the world are indispensable for the success of this environmental evocation. It can be argued that this quality of *The Road* that makes it an interesting piece of environmental imagination.

Imagining New Worlds: *The Road*

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. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all.

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy has once said that “if it doesn’t concern life and death, it is not interesting” (Kushner 2). Like the majority of his works, *The Road* is certainly about these concepts, although it reflects much more of an ecological aspect, engaging in the failing survival of not only humankind but also of nature. Dealing with these issues, McCarthy sets the mood of the novel from the first lines:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world... With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There’d be no surviving another winter here. (2)

While many writers have commented on the “naturalistic impulse” of McCarthy’s previous novels, as Tim Edwards suggests, *The Road* offers no similar reading of the nature with its grey, cold and lifeless post-apocalyptic world (2). Quite the opposite, instead of giving pastoral details, the natural world of the novel gives the impression of a wasted country filled with dead trees falling, ashes blowing in the wind. However, it is interesting to see that while all the living things in nature have died, manmade creations such as buildings, billboards, supermarkets, oil stations, roadside billboards and most importantly the road itself seem eerily unscathed by the catastrophe, continuing to exist even though there is hardly anyone to utilize them. Throughout the novel, McCarthy usually presents nature and the manmade things together. While the destruction of the former stands in stark contrast to the sturdiness of the latter, the point McCarthy strives to make is without a doubt a critical one, as can be seen from a dialogue that passes between the father and the son about a dam they come across in their journey to the South:

Will the dam be there for a long time?

I think so. It’s made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even.

Do you think there could be fish in the lake?

No. There’s nothing in the lake (19).

Reminiscent of Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, the dialogue brings a new perspective to the mechanization of the nature. As Harvey says it is the flow of money that has transformed nature from the early days of our existence to the contemporary times, although the speed of transformation has reached its climax in modern times. Fueled by the need to facilitate human life, the transformations have radically changed the face of the earth and as Harvey suggests there is hardly any place on earth that has not been subject to human modification (332). While it is true that as humankind is a part of the ecosystem and like every member of it changes the conditions of its environment to better suit for its survival, the velocity and grandiosity of these projects have unfortunately been adversely affecting the natural life. And although humans tend to forget it, we are also part of the ecosystem and environmental problems have adverse impacts on us too. What would happen if nature would be unable to support the velocity of these changes is an important issue that McCarthy tries to display with the presence of the empty state roads in the novel. Looking at a tattered oil company map together, the father realizes that the child knows neither about states nor state roads:

We cross a bridge here. It looks to be about eight miles or so. This is the river. Going east. We follow the road here along the eastern slope of the mountains. These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads.

Why are they the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I don't know exactly. That's a good question.

But the roads are still there.

Yes. For a while.

How long a while?

I don't know. Maybe quite a while. There's nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while.

But there won't be any cars or trucks on them.

No (43-4).

The picture McCarthy presents us about the future is a horrid yet a cautionary one. It seems apparent that if the modification of nature and the recklessness of the humankind continue at this rate, there will be hardly anyone of us left in the future to utilize our creations that we worship. Kiel Moe suggests that the presence of the country's state roads reaching in total four million miles appears as "an endless, horizontal monument to the technics and hubris of the twentieth century" in *The Road* (18). Considering the novel's critique of over-consumerist society, the inventions of the humankind, intact in their shape and presence in post-apocalyptic world yet lacking any use for the remaining human population, indeed seem like pitiful monuments to the wastefulness of our times. The novel's juxtaposition of the lifeless nature and solid buildings of the humankind without a doubt carries a didactic purpose that aims to propel the reader to question the sustainability of our actions and nature. This point is further investigated in the novel by the presence of an oil station devoid of petrol. The father and the son goes back to an oil station just to fill their bottles with the sediments of oil that was once abundant in the world, yet wasted without care for the environment or the future of oil:

We're not thinking, he said. We have to go back. He pushed the cart off the road and tilted it over where it could not be seen and they left their packs and went back to the station. In the service bay he dragged out the steel trashdrum and tipped it over and pawed out all the quart plastic oilbottles. Then 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. He screwed down the plastic cap and wiped the bottle off with a rag and hefted it in his hand. Oil for their little slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns. You can read me a story, the boy said. Can't you, Papa? Yes, he said. I can (5-6).

The duo's discovery of a vending machine that offers probably the last can of coke, an omnipresent drink of our times presents further commentary on today's consumer culture as well:

By the door were two soft drink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat

looking at a Coca Cola (22–23).

Brian Donnelly states that, while this discovery creates collusion between pre and post apocalyptic world that results in a nostalgic sentiment, the presence of the coke is nevertheless uncanny. He argues that the scene, almost reminiscent of an advertisement, presents the father and the son bonding over the can of coke and ending with the son's acknowledgment that "it is really good" also functions as a reminder of the contemporary society that shows no restraint in its consumption levels (70-71). The criticism of excesses of the society is further delineated by the father and his son's visits to the empty supermarkets, scavenging for food to fill their shopping carts. For many years now, the picture of a family doing their shopping in a supermarket filling their baskets without restraint has been forced into our minds as a sign of happiness and normalcy. Yet the present picture of abundance stands in sharp contrast to the supermarkets of the future. By presenting the empty supermarket, the novel seems to suggest that it is the overconsumption that has led to the depletion of the world of its natural resources and to the mass extinction of plant and animal species leaving the survivors with nothing to eat but either some remnants of canned food (provided if they could find it), or each other.

In the world of novel where access to food is hard and scarce, the literal cannibalism of the remaining human population offers a cautionary tale for our times. Maybe not in the same sense, yet metaphorically similar, we live in a world where humankind can destroy itself for material gain and access to resources. The cannibalism in the novel quite evocatively appears at parts concerning the unholy trinity of the road, oil and truck people. While the father and the son can hardly find oil to light their lamps to fill those long nights with reading stories, the truck people's access to this resource seems uncanny:

He could see a break through the trees that he thought was a ditch or a cut and they came out through the weeds into an old roadway. Plates of cracked macadam showing through the drifts of ash. He pulled the boy down and they crouched under the bank listening, gasping for breath. They could hear the diesel engine out on the road, running on God knows what. When he raised up to look he could just see the top of the truck moving along the road. Men standing in the stakebed, some of them holding rifles. The truck passed on and the black diesel smoke coiled through the woods. The motor sounded ropy. Missing and puttering. Then it quit (64).

Undoubtedly the bad guys of the novel, the impression these truck people create with their clubs and pipes and slaves to eat is one of horror in the novel. It seems that the father his son's identity and their motto of being "good guys" seems to have been based on being the complete opposite of these people. Yet the fact is, if one looks close enough, it is possible to see parallelisms between truck people and contemporary society, the latter being almost an extension of the former. A hidden criticism of oil politics and neo-imperialism of our times that verges on violent politics, the truck people seem to signal that all these will end self-annihilation and doom.

The road itself plays an important role in the novel. Standing in stark contrast to the decimated nature that surrounds it, the road continues to the South untouched by the apocalypse and provides companionship and a route to the pair. Centered in the middle of the nature yet at the same time completely removed from it due to the uselessness of the former, the road in the novel starkly shows the complete removal of human society from nature, a process that has arguably started with the process of industrialization and gained impetus in the previous decades. Since nature is destroyed and unable to renew itself, the father and child could find no other way but to follow the road to find themselves some food and shelter on their journey to South.

Complete dependency of the humankind to biology and nature becomes even more pronounced in their journey on the road and in the cities the duo pass in hopes of finding food, since the novel shows that for all their grandiosity, the centers of human civilization cannot provide enough for the survival of the species. The destitution of the nature makes their journey South even more hopeless, implying that even though they may find better weather conditions there, without food they will not be able to survive. Thus the road in its centrality of the novel does nothing but to present a hopeless route to the protagonists, and in its grandiosity and intactness reminds us that we are treasuring wrong things.

Furthermore, as Rune Graulund suggests the narrative of the road bears nothing similar to the classic American road stories, claiming that although the man and the child are always on the move, “they are not going anywhere” since in the world of *The Road* it makes no difference whether “one moves or stays put” due to the universal decimation of the world (67). Considering that the general features of the road narratives, such as joy of travelling or thrill of running away from the society are absent in the novel, one can say that the title of the novel suggestive of such narratives function as an ironical reminder of the squandering attitudes of the present world. Yet most importantly the fact that there is no return to home for the father and the child in this post-apocalyptic world, leaves no room for nostalgia of the road narratives and shows that the universe no longer cares for the future of the humankind:

They scabbled through the charred ruins of houses they would not have entered before. A corpse floating in the black water of a basement among the trash and rusting duct-work. He stood in a livingroom partly burned and open to the sky. The waterbuckled boards sloping away into the yard. Soggy volumes in a bookcase. He took one down and opened it and then put it back. Everything damp. Rotting. In a drawer he found a candle. No way to light it. He put it in his pocket. He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (138).

As can be seen from this scene, the father realizes the emptiness of their dream of reaching the South, yet for the sake of the child he keeps on going. Throughout their journey, he ponders on the new world in which the meaning of existence has been reduced to surviving the day. Thus when he hears the child speak of long-term goals, he is startled by the concept (170). Reading an old newspaper, he is surprised by the triviality of the old world issues finding them to be full of “curious news” and “quaint concerns” (28). In this new world, “the day being providential to itself”, “there are no lists of things to be done” and the presence of the boy is what keeps the man going (56). However, for the child the sole presence of his father is not enough. As the scenes where he believes that he has seen a child about his age and the ones in which he displays his goodness to the people they have come across in the road signify, the boy stands for the importance of human community and solidarity in the novel. Wary of the strangers and unwilling to help others, the father is undoubtedly a member of the old world that has brought down the end of the world by metaphorically and literally consuming each other. The scene where they come across to an old man who calls himself Ely further elaborates the differences between the old world and the new world people. After the child shares their food with the old

man who does not even give them his real name lest they would betray him to other people, confesses to the father that he would not have shared his food with the boy if they were to switch places:

You should thank him you know, the man said. I wouldnt have given you anything.

Maybe I should and maybe I shouldnt.

Why wouldnt you?

I wouldnt have given him mine.

You dont care if it hurts his feelings?

Will it hurt his feelings?

No. That’s not why he did it.

Why did he do it?

He looked over at the boy and he looked at the old man. You wouldnt understand, he said. I’m not sure I do (184).

Although the father clearly does not understand why his child sincerely wants to help other people, it is apparent that it was the kind of attitude the father and the old man display has caused the demise of the humankind. The child, maybe instinctively sensing this or maybe due to the fact that he was born into the new world and has not seen the old one understands the importance of sharing and benevolence for the continuity of life on earth. That is why he is heartbroken to see his father unwilling to help the others. One can argue that by making this difference between the father and the child visible to the reader McCarthy suggests a complete change of mindset and consumer habits to the consumer society, one that is based on a more equal share of goods and on human qualities such as goodness and sharing instead of stealing and hoarding. McCarthy makes a case for a new political and social outlook that would sustain a future in the world without sounding didactical by influencing the reader to ponder on the difference between the father and the son. Whereas it might be too late for the father and Ely, we still have time to alter our ways of living.

The father, unaccustomed to the boy’s way of thinking compares him to an alien from a different planet from time to time (137). However, as the time passes, he comes to accept the fact that it is he who is one of the last representatives of a planet that no longer exists: to the boy he might himself be an alien (163). Arguably this is due to the fact that for the father, there is a strong connection between space, place and identity while there is none for the child. The child is given a clean slate while the father has to live with the visions of the old world in which he is constantly reminded of the past times either by his colorful dreams that portrays his wife accompanied by pastoral beauties of the former world or by his recognition of some places, the way they used to be. That is why the boy feels restless in the presence of his father’s childhood home. While for the father, the building has some memories, for the child is has none, therefore for the boy his father’s points and gestures claiming past moments does not mean anything to the boy (24).

However, the father feels that in each recollection of a moment, his memory betrays it more and more, doing “some violence to its origins” (139). One can explain the decay of his memories and identity by the centrality of place in our lives. Buell says that, “place is succinctly definable space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 145). Living or passing through places, we unconsciously let those places to become meaningful parts of our identities and memories. Yet, due to annihilation of the world in the novel, the environment and social life lose their meaning and distinctiveness, making it impossible for the father to continue his attachment to particular places, therefore creating a gap between his identity, memory and

place. One can argue that what the father goes through is quite normal. Considering the fact that our identities and memories are based on the experiences we have had in particular places, our identities and memories can be subject to distortions and decay when those places are no longer available to us. In a similar way, Ben de Bruyn suggests that by rendering culture and nature devastated in the novel McCarthy asks us to imagine how the human world would be affected by this change of balance (781). In creating this impact, McCarthy provides a sad picture of loss of the culture, place and identity through the father figure who is provided as our last connection to the old world. As we follow his journey, we witness that things without referents do not mean anything at all for us as much as for the man:

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 (93).

As the reader knows the old world as much as the father does, the father's efforts to protect his memories of it seem even more poignant and hopeless. It can be argued that by making the reader witness what the father goes through, the novel questions our priorities in life. Without nature to support life, human civilization seems at most like an utopic ideal, as can be seen from the father's attitude in the library:

Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light (199).

The yearning for an alive nature is best expressed in the man's dreams that portray his deceased wife with the pastoral beauties of the old world (17, 20). Yet the man is aware that clinging on a past that will never come back is a hopeless dream. That is why he tries to leave remnants of his past behind by getting rid of his billfold after carrying it for years. As he leaves behind the contents of it such as his driver's license, some money, credit cards and a picture of his wife, the father tries to relinquish on the part of his identity that does not correspond to the daily needs of the new world (52).

Betty and Theodore Roszak claim that over the last century we have witnessed a spiritual crisis that has emerged in the form of a serious loss of aesthetic sensitivity due to our alienation of nature. They further support this idea by quoting Herbert Read, who says that since "art, science and technology harbors the illusion that we live outside or above the natural world we may treat it as we please", we run the risk of turning it into an object of exploitation for the sole benefit of our kind (223). In *The Road*, McCarthy overcomes this problem by practically leaving the reader in the middle of the nature. However, the natural life that he unites the alienated readers with is the natural world of a post-apocalyptic one that does not seem to have the ability of regeneration. The picture McCarthy presents is a horrible one to look at and through its juxtapositions with the father's pastoral dreams it creates a nostalgic affect. In creating this affect, McCarthy appeals to the readers' environmental imagination and asks them to imagine a world that no longer supports survival of any species. By doing so he seems to imply that we are not as far away from nature as

we think we are, our dependency on nature has never been and never will be optional. Triggering a sense of guilt or consciousness in the reader, *The Road* adopts a pre-emptive attitude about the environmental problems, one that utilizes environmental imagination and post-apocalyptic narrative to its fullest. This quality of the novel makes it one of the most important environmental books of our time.

McCarthy's prose makes it clear that in this world, without the nature, survival is a hopeless dream. Although some critics such as Ashley Kunsu and Rune Graulund defend the idea that the ethics of the child may present redemption for the humankind and the fact that he finds another family may stand for the possibility of a new life in the world, I would argue that *The Road* does not offer any hope but just plays on the concept of it in order to make us realize how hopeless the situation is. As Michael Chabon suggests although we worry about the duo and root for their cause of reaching the South, we realize that the overall purpose of their journey that is to survive is nevertheless an illusion, one that cannot be sustained considering the present situation of the nature in the novel (11). By playing with our passion for survival and showing hollowness of the hope in a post-apocalyptic world McCarthy tells us a precautionary tale about environment.

Coming from a similar world we can understand the father's fear of death, yet for the child who was born into a world that is dead, the death itself is a natural thing, even preferable to living as he says from time to time (56, 89). The father thinks that the only reason he lives for is the child yet it is actually the child himself that has lived for the sake of his father. However different their viewpoints or motives may be, as the narrator suggests what they know about the present world they live in is the same, there will be no movement on the face of the earth after the last human dies. The point is made crystal clear in the episode that narrates their discovery of a defunct train:

They went through the last of the cars and then walked up the track to the locomotive and climbed up to the catwalk. Rust and scaling paint. They pushed into the cab and he blew away the ash from the engineer's seat and put the boy at the controls. The controls were very simple. Little to do but push the throttle lever forward. He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn't sure what these might mean to the boy. After a while they just looked out through the silted glass to where the track curved away in the waste of weeds. If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again (192).

The passage negates all the possibility of hope and implies that once nature is gone and survival is out of question, the best one can hope for is to die with some dignity. Therefore it renders the man and the child's hopes for meeting other good guys on the road even more poignant and pointless.

McCarthy concludes his post-apocalyptic tale of this father and son with a focus on nature, with a paragraph that laments the exhaustion of natural life:

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 torsional. On their backs were vermiculate 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.

As de Bruyn claims the word “once” suggests the irreversibility of this probably man-made apocalypse, while the passage itself functions as a reminder of the connection between nature and man (788). The focus of the story suddenly shifts its place from the man and the child to the no longer existing mystery of the universe. This change in focus also bestows some eco-global and ecocentric quality on the text as it implies wherever we are in the world, our actions have global consequences for the nature, considering the fact that nature is map of interconnections between inanimate and organismal. And once this delicate balance is disturbed there might not be a way to fix it. McCarthy’s subtle yet powerful handling of these aspects of nature, human survival and the concept of hope makes *The Road* an effective piece of literary imagination, one that will not leave the consciousness of the reader hopefully for a long time.

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