

***Bon Voyage: A Peer-Reviewed  
Journal of English Studies***

- Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL
- Print ISSN: 2382-5308



Published by:

**Department of English  
Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan  
University, Kathmandu, Nepal**

---

**Utopia in Dystopia: Presentation of the Landscape in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road***

**Prakash Sharma** 

Department of English, Dhawalagiri Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Baglung,  
Nepal

---

**Article History:** Submitted 09 June, 2024; Reviewed 27 June, 2024; Revised 28 June, 2024

**Corresponding Author:** Prakash Sharma, E-mail: sharmaparakash166@gmail.com

**Copyright 2024**© The Author(s). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/bovo.v6i1.68261>

---

Page 98-106

**Abstract**

*This paper explores the presentation of the utopian landscape in a dystopian world to impart the message of optimism in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* employing the theoretical ideas of ecocriticism focusing on the environmental apocalypse trend. The text as post-apocalyptic fiction presents the earth near destruction in relation to humans, animals and plants world after a frightening apocalypse. The two unnamed characters journey through the desolate landscape in search of safety. The landscape is full of silence and lifelessness, frightening and unfriendly for survival that tells a terrifying tale indeed. At the same time, the landscape is presented as a major component of the theme. More than that landscape itself is a text that needs interpretation as it has multiple possibilities. The world of the novel is dominated by a dystopian landscape. However, within that deadly world, the world of dream and memory is full of utopian landscape. This contrastive presentation seems purposeful. It is to keep the strand of hope and aware readers about the negative consequences, which the anthropocentric invasion to the natural system invites. Following qualitative research design, this paper uses textual analysis method to interpret the text with the critical ideas of Lawrence Buell related to the environmental apocalypse trend.*

**Keywords:** Apocalypse, dystopia, hope, landscape, utopia

## **Introduction**

The presentation of the utopian landscape in a dystopian world for generating hope in critical situations is explored in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* from ecocritical perspective. It analyzes both the charming and frightening landscapes in the text. Dealing with the dystopian events, this novel exposes the threat to the entire humanity in the endangered situation. It is indicated through mass robbery, mass murder, and extreme natural disaster. They are the outcome of human negligence to the wellness of our ecosystem. Even in such a gloomy atmosphere, the writer sheds the light of hope and creates optimism presenting a utopian landscape in the world of dreams and memories.

McCarthy presents two unnamed characters struggling through the devastated landscape to reach the coastal area. In every step, they encounter threats to life but manage to reach the goal. The narrative incorporates certain naturally beautiful landscapes within that desolate world. This research work aims to examine critically and analyze such issues. As post-apocalyptic fiction, this novel deals with the severe crisis leading human civilization to the verge of extinction. The pervasiveness of the terrific landscape is obvious. In spite of that, the world of dreams and memories is full of natural beauty. This landscape of natural beauty indicates hope for regeneration. Using both primary and secondary data, this qualitative research work applies a textual analysis method to interpret the primary text with the critical ideas of Lawrence Buell. His ideas related to the interdependence between biotic and abiotic worlds, and the outcomes of human negligence to this reality are used as theoretical parameters to justify the claim.

## **Literature Review**

The novel has elicited numerous responses from the critics after its publication. They have explored the different aspects of the narrative. These critical reactions have proved the artistry of McCarthy. Highlighting the positive aspect of the novel, indicating the possibility after the apocalypse Ashley Kunsu writes, "*The Road* is not tabula rasa, not a re- imagination from scratch; it takes what remains after the world has been destroyed and goes forward from there in search of what is next" (69). Kunsu highlights both the terrifying aspect as well as hope after that. The post-apocalyptic world of the novel is the speculation after the great destructive event. Similarly, Erik J. Wielenberg highlights the aspect of morality in the novel. He mentions, "The Road contains both a clear moral code and examines its connection with meaning in life. Along the way, I discuss the struggle of the man and child to live up to the moral code" (1). The moral aspect of the novel is explored by Wielenberg. He sees how the moral codes are related to the meaning of life in the text. The situation of the novel is near collapse. Survival is the only desire of the characters. Even in such situations, the characters of the novel, especially the old man and the boy, show extreme moral behavior. The same moral behavior gives meaning in their life in the meaningless world.

Tim Edward focuses on the presentation of landscape in the novel, "We should consider how McCarthy's novel seems to present landscape as text" (56). For Edward the

landscape is not just the scene or the physical entity but the text itself that unfolds so many ideas. It has literal meaning that is seen from outside and symbolic meaning that is hidden and needs exploration. Landscape of the novel is frightening and devoid of living organisms but its message is of great value. It advocates for drastic change in human activities and human thought in relation to the interdependence of the biotic and abiotic world. Lydia R. Cooper claims the novel's association with the grail narrative. Like that of traditional grail narrative, the novel in modern sense focuses on the spiritual and moral renewal that is needed for the continuity of human existence. "*The Road* examines pervasive apocalyptic fear in order to explore if and how the human project may be preserved" (219). Cooper reveals that in the usual manner human civilization is not going to survive. It needs a new way of eco-friendly thinking and way of behavior.

Another critic Mohamed Miffdal stresses the style of the novel that poses questions to the postmodern way of life. He points out, "McCarthy's style in this novel bears the seed of deep philosophical questioning of the postmodern way of life and its effect on our relation to the real and to the values of altruistic love, sacrifice and freedom"(1). The novel is taken as the exposition of the vices of the postmodern way of life that disregards the value of altruism, sacrifice, freedom etc.

Issue of women's inclusion is observed in Brent Ryan Bellamy's *Reminders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*. He blames the writer for excluding women in the narrative, "The problem here is that *The Road* effectively banishes the women from its pages, despite the fact that she is necessary to the flourishing of the man and the boy" (157). He points out, though the women's role in the story remains crucial for the cohesion and successful completion of the plot; they are intentionally omitted from it. The gender biasness is pointed out by Bellamy. Glenna M. Andrade in "The Road to Post Apocalyptic Fiction: McCarthy's Challenges to Post- Apocalyptic Genre" stands against the hopeful ending of the novel, "*The Road* is more than a simple quest for a safe home. It challenges the boundaries of typical Post Apocalypse novels and complicates the usual, hopeful ending" (2). The writer claims uncertainty as the whole atmosphere is inappropriate for life and survival is questionable.

This literature review clarifies that *The Road* is studied from different perspectives. Kunsu focuses on the positive possibility after the apocalypse whereas Edward raises the issue of desolate landscape. Weilenberg discusses the moral dimension of the novel and Cooper compares the narrative with grail narrative. Miffdal critiques the post-modern lifestyle of the novel and Bellamy stresses the exclusion of women in the narrative. To the best of my knowledge, very few research works have attempted to analyze the presentation of a utopian landscape within a dystopian world to impart the message of optimism in the novel. This is the research gap the study aims to fulfil.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Representation of nature in literature is as old as the written literature. Until the second half of the twentieth century, nature was taken just as means of fulfilling human

needs. This anthropocentric view, backed up by the Bible regards human beings as the master of the universe. Regarding the same concept, Lynn White, Jr. points to a problem. He states, "What we do about ecology depends on our idea of the man nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one"(45). He emphasizes that the root of ecological problems largely depends on the religion that is Christianity and should search for remedy there. Rejecting the problematic Christian perspective, one should see the value of nature independently to get rid of this problem. There is the need of reintroducing the paganistic concept of sprite in nature. Disregarding this nature friendly concept, Christianity has opened the path of anthropocentrism leading to nature's exploitation.

This concept of anthropocentrism is taken as a great problem in environmental study. Devall and Sessions in their work *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Matters* explain anthropocentrism as "Belief that humans are superior to and in charge of the natural world" (65). This belief promoted by Christianity is considered greatly problematic from the beginning of the modern period. Its focal point is anthropocentric thinking that tries to explain the biological world with human analogy. This tendency of explaining about nature with the analogy to humans is equally dangerous. "The tendency to reason about unfamiliar biological species or process by analogy to human beings brings disaster" (Coley et al. 210). They see problems in the trend of using human analogy in the act of reasoning about other species. This trend attempts to authenticate human supremacy. When people analyze it critically, they encounter many lapses in it. Anthropocentrism results in individualism and material greed that causes great devastation to the ecosphere.

In this climate of crisis, ecocriticism was inaugurated. In the mid-eighties, the field of environmental literary studies was planted and in the early nineties, it grew up. Cheryll Glotfelty associated it with the study of the relationship between literature and environment. To establish ecocriticism as an independent discipline Glotfelty associates its stages with the stages of feminism forwarded by Elaine Showalter: representation, reconsideration and theoretical foundation. In the first stage, representation of nature in literature was studied to identify whether that was a stereotype or not. In the second stage, recuperation was made of the neglected genre of nature writing, promoting this body of literature

Lawrence Buell, the leading thinker of the environmental apocalypse trend, presents the literary vision of environmental catastrophe in his essay, "Environmental Apocalypticism". Among the master metaphors he relates to the whole order of nature, the metaphor of the web is very crucial to talk about the interdependency of plants and animals. "Plants and animals are after all bounded together; bodies and world are caught in a network of dependence" (283). Indicating the nuclear holocaust as the source of modern apocalypse Buell writes, "the possibility of total destruction enough to sustain a high level of vehemence; the moral absurdity of it actually happening is enough to prove skepticism

toward apocalyptic discourse" (299). At the same time, the great possibility of ecological catastrophe created "the occasion for environmental apocalyptic expression" (308). The interference of human beings to the web of interdependence and their disastrous outcome created the appropriate context for the expression of environmental apocalypse

Buell asserts, "For secular apocalypse than the world has ever seen aggravates traditional oscillations between hope and despair" (299). The interplay of hope and hopelessness is better in secular apocalypse than in traditional apocalypse. Indicating the purpose of apocalyptic literature Buell argues, "We create image of doom to avert doom" (295). It means apocalyptic literature creates dystopian events to avert such events compelling people to think seriously.

These theoretical insights of anthropocentrism and ecocriticism with special focus on the ideas of environmental apocalypse that exposes the dreadful consequences of anthropocentric misdeeds are used for the analysis of the primary text. Following the theoretical parameters of this trend, this research makes the critical analysis of the utopian landscape in the dystopian world of the novel.

### **Utopia in Dystopia: Generation of Hope**

Set in the United States after a frightening apocalypse, *The Road* presents the earth in near destruction. Although the source of apocalypse is not mentioned, the devastation clarifies the sources are nuclear and natural calamity leading to environmental crisis and total devastation. The unfriendly earth might take human life easily. Readers encounter two unnamed characters bound by the relationship of father and son. Their struggle for survival in calamity is heart rendering. They negotiate the devastated landscape of fire and ash for years hoping to find safety and warmth in the South.

Their survival depends upon the act of scavenging the landscape where only the living creatures include humans, devoid of humanity, some dogs and fungi. After all, the father struggles to keep his son alive and metaphorically to preserve nobility with the message of merit in the continuity of the human race. The journey from the extreme cold mountain region to the coastal region stands for the quest of life supporting climate in the south. The earth is dead, the only living things are a few fungi, some dogs and some humans turned into cannibals for survival. Even in the extremely difficult course of their journey, the two characters stand for humanity. In spite of the gloomy picture, certain rays of hope are reflected in the novel. Especially the memories and dreams of the characters contain the landscapes that are utopian and keep hope in characters and readers.

### **Dystopian Landscapes: Indication of Severe Crisis**

*The Road* covers the events and situations that are horrific and heart rendering. Both nature and human behaviors are challenges for the survival of human civilization. The earth has lost its natural beauty and power of regeneration. It has turned into a place "barren, silent and godless" (McCarthy 2). Natural qualities of the earth have gone ruptured and it has become an inappropriate place for humans, animals and plants. The surface covered by ash and the landscape devoid of greenery dominates the world. The extreme cold and

longer nights have added the suffering of the characters in their journey for survival. The environment has become horrific "Where all was burnt to ash, before them no fires were to be had and the nights were long and dark, and cold beyond anything they had yet encountered. Cold to crack the stones. To take your life" (13). Nature is not in normal condition but in the extreme form. This situation is not the outcome of any supernatural happening but the anthropocentric intervention of the natural system by human beings. In relation to this issue, Lawrence Buell states, "Human intervention into the natural system unintentionally makes a point about the unintended consequences" (382). Such interventions result in different natural calamities that lead to many other critical situations.

The long and dark nights have made the situation more horrific. The extreme cold is terrific that can crack the stone and take human life. Travelling through the forest the son looks at the dead roadside trees. His innocent mind takes the scene strange. The father responds with hopeless remarks; "All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later" (35). He constantly observes the landscape with his binocular for seeking out threats. However, what he finds is a landscape devoid of many of its previous defining features. Actually, the landscape tells a terrifying tale indeed. This terrific form of nature is the outcome of human indifference towards the ecological crisis and anthropocentrism. Val Plumwood blames human centeredness for this problem. She claims, "Human-centeredness promotes various damaging forms of episteme remoteness, for by walling ourselves off from nature in order to exploit it, we also lose certain abilities to situate ourselves as part of it" (98). This anthropocentric othering of nature leads to the exploitation and ultimately destruction of our ecosphere inviting different types of apocalypses.

In the journey of the characters, they encounter such a terrific landscape that just increases their anxiety and frustration. "Along the interstate in the distance along lines of charred and rusting cars. ... They went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. The nights dead, still and deader black. So cold" (McCarthy 292). The possibility of meeting any settlement alive is no more. Passing through the dead world, they encounter death numerous times. Presentation of this chaotic world is purposeful. Through such a presentation, the writer aims to shake the thoughts of people and, change their way of thinking and way of behavior. Buell clearly indicates the purpose of such an apocalyptic presentation, "We create an image of doom to avert doom" (250). Buell is clear about the aim of dystopian events presented in post-apocalyptic fictions. Their purpose is corrective. In the context of the novel *The Road*, same the purpose is applicable. The presentation of the devastated world is for triggering the thoughts of people and bringing change in their way of thinking and way of behavior.

### **Utopian Memories and Dreams: Signal Hope**

In contrast to the dystopian world of reality; the utopian world exposed in dreams and memories of the characters signals positive possibility in *The Road*. Two struggling spirits: the father and the son continue their journey full of suffering, pain, silence and darkness. Repeatedly they escape from the existing trouble to the memory and dream. They

give the characters solace and at the same time create optimism in the readers. The memories from childhood are presented as follows:

There was a lake a mile from his uncle's farm where he and his uncle used to go in the fall for firewood. He sat in the back of the rowboat trailing his hand in the cold wake while his uncle bent to the oar. . . . The shore was lined with birch trees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreen beyond. The edge of the lake is a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane year past. . . . This was the perfect day of his childhood. This is the day to shape the days upon. (McCarthy 11-12)

This memory recounts both the childhood of the father and nature in its beautiful form. Missing both of them haunt the old man. Revelation of the nostalgia for the lost childhood and lost natural beauty is the essence of the memory. In another term, it is the nostalgia of the lost world. This nostalgic presentation signals how the beautiful world enchanted by natural beauty turned into a devastating world because of human failure to recognize the web of interdependence. Buell argues this as the, "Projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transfer itself according to the doctrine of the web" (285). If human civilization fails to reconcile with the reality of interdependence between the biotic and abiotic world, it will lead to the possibility of extinction.

The beauty of nature from the past and the memory of his wife remain deep rooted in the father's mind. Therefore, they come in his dream. He finds his wife among flowers, dazzling appearance, dark hair decorated with combs of ivory. The green and leafy canopy, flowering wood, flying bird, uncanny taste of a peach and phantom orchard are related to the spellbinding nature:

In dreams, his pale bride came to him out of the green and leafy canopy. Her nipples piperlayed and her ribs bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes . . . . He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them. He had the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself up from such siren worlds. (McCarthy 17)

The beautiful and serene woodland environment with birds flying before them is charming in its beauty. The father is aware about the impossibility of such beauty in their current reality. They function as reminders of the past and possibility in the far future.

This desire for pristine nature assimilates with the ideas of John Hannigan expressed in his book *Environmental Sociology*. He states "Unspoiled natural settings took on a special meaning; that is, the stress of city living created a rising tide of nostalgia among the urban middle class for the joy of country life and outdoor living" (41). In the novel's context, nostalgia is for the natural beauty of the pre-apocalyptic world. As the people of the city desire for the unspoiled nature, the characters of the novel desire for the pre-apocalyptic natural beauty. The devastated world of the present moment that leads to the nostalgia of the past or pre-apocalyptic world is the outcome of the anthropocentric

backgrounding of nature. It is taken as inessential and systematically omitted from account. Regarding this issue Val Plumwood points, "Dependency on nature is denied, systematically, so that nature's order, resistance and survival requirements are not perceived as imposing a limit on human goal or enterprise" (108). This systematic denial and backgrounding of nature has led to the crisis in ecology with the destruction of nature. Until we accept our dependency on nature and treat nature respectfully, such problems arise repeatedly.

These dreams and memories, full of utopian landscapes, function as means of transitory escape from the bleak reality for the characters. The readers also feel relief from the terror and horror of the post-apocalyptic world. The moments of beauty continue, "He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them" (McCarthy 17). These moments are not just escape from the present crisis but the moments that inspire them to continue their struggle in the critical situation. The reality is so pathetic that only stress, anxiety and pain are parts of life. To generate hope, they have to escape to the past in dreams and memories. Present situation of lifelessness is contrasted with the past. "He had stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in the pool, invisible to see in the tea-colored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flesh of knives in a cave" (42). They encourage the characters, giving them a glimpse of future possibilities. Richard Kerridge calls this short escape a strategy of insufferability that does not let readers to be passive but leads for action. He postulates, "This strategy of insufferability, if strategy it is, says to the reader: here is something that gives you no option of reacting just a little. You must either face the scenario, or turn away from it unable to pretend you are doing anything" (374). Their key function is to create hope in the nearly destroyed world and lead for the action of ecological protection.

### **Conclusion**

The critical analysis of the novel reveals that the novel is the juxtaposition of the contrastive landscapes: the edenic landscape of dream and memories and the horrible landscape of reality. The present that the characters experience is horrific. The whole atmosphere is silent, terrible, lifeless and frightening. The whole ecosphere is dark, dead and gloomy. Those surviving human beings have turned into cannibals. Death dominates the scenario but luckily, the characters survive. Anxiety, frustration and hopelessness are the common features. The landscape itself is sufficient to tell the terrible tale. Within such a frightening world, the writer presents certain events and situations that generate hope. More than that, there we find another world that is the world of dream and memory. The characters attempt to escape from the terrible present reality to the beautiful past in the world of dream and memory. The world of memory is full of natural beauty and all human beings in harmonious relation. But that charming world is no more in existence. The presentation of the two opposing worlds is purposeful. Through this presentation, the writer gives the message that making the world utopian or dystopian depends on our activities



related to ecology. Our unnecessary intervention to the system of nature disregarding the interdependence leads to a terrific world. At the same time, promotion of a symbiotic relation leads to a utopian world of natural beauty. The presentation of the Utopia in Dystopia in the novel aims to generate hope and give a sense of optimism to the characters and readers. And at the same time, it encourages the action of eco protection.

### Works Cited

- Bellamy, Brent Ryan. *Reminder of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*. Wesleyan UP, 2021.
- Buell, Lawrence. "Environmental Apocalypticism." *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and Formation of American Culture*. Harvard UP, 1995, pp. 280-310.
- Cooley, John D. et al. "Common Origin of Diverse Misconception: Cognitive Principle and Development of Biology Thinking." *CBE: Life Science Education*. vol. 11, no. 3, 2013, pp. 209-15.
- Cooper, Lydia R. "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 42, no.2. The John Hopkins UP, 2011, pp. 218-36.
- Devall, Bill and George Session. *Deep Ecology: living as if Nature Mattered*. Peregrine Smith Books, 1985.
- Edward, Tim. "The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol.6, Penn State UP, 2008, pp. 55-61. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909382>.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. The U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Hannigan, John. "Environmental Discourse." *Environmental Sociology*. Reprint Routledge, 2008, pp. 36-53.
- Kerridge, Richard. "Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Forms and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality." *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 361-76.
- Kunsa, Ashley. "Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol.33, no.1, Indian UP, 2009, pp. 57-74.  
URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jml.2009.33.1.57>.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Picador, 2006.
- Mifdal, Mohmed. "Dystopian Satire in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: A Language That Echoes the Collapse of Whole Culture." *Research in Humor and Irony*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 17-33.
- Plumwood, Val. "The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-Enclosure." *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002, pp. 97-122.
- Wielenberg, Erk J. "God Morality and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 8, no.1, Penn State UP, 2010, pp. 1-19.
- White, Lynn Jr. *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*. Routledge, 2008