

The Role of Human Nature and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

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

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

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Introduction

By all means, *The Road*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Cormac McCarthy, is a dark, gloomy, unsettling, and terrifying post-apocalyptic novel set in a desolate, icy country where “nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what has gone before” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 3). The sun appears to be “banished” from the Earth behind the thick layers of ash, surrounding “the ground like a bereaved mother with a lamp” (p. 28). Every genuine post-apocalyptic writer bases the world they create on their own desires and concerns, and they draw inspiration from some fundamental aspects of human nature. In *The Road*, McCarthy draws on themes of apocalypse, morality, and parental love

Methodology

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

McCarthy’s Apocalypse

There are others who disagree with M.H. Abrams’(2009) classification of *The Road* as a dystopian work, arguing that while the post-apocalyptic and dystopian genres share many similarities, they are actually distinct ones. A work of fiction that “represents a very unpleasant hypothetical world in which worrisome tendencies of our current social, political, and technical order are projected into a tragic future completion” is what Abrams characterizes as a “dystopia,” according to him (p. 378). Post-apocalypse and *The Road* both fit Abrams' description of dystopian fiction, which describes it as a depiction of a bleak, uncomfortable, fantastical, and tragic future world in which McCarthy's pessimism about people and modern civilization is brought to its most extreme point. Therefore, this book is classified as both dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction by Abrams. *The Road*, according to him, is a dystopian tale “set in a grim, post-nuclear landscape” (p. 379).

McCarthy doesn't reveal the reason for his apocalypse, unlike many other post-apocalyptic books where the cause of The Event (apocalypse) is a crucial component of the plot. The only thing he depicts is “a world that, in the wake of some unnamed” and “unspecified” apocalyptic catastrophe, “has dissolved into a primordial condition devoid of nature, culture, law, personal identity, government, economics,

territorial borders, agriculture, literature, commerce, art—or any recognizable feature of the world in which we live” (Hage, 2010, p. 140). A catastrophe that destroyed life, obscured the sun, covered the earth in ash, and brought an end to civilization.

The general premise of post-apocalyptic fiction is that a catastrophic event occurs, seriously altering the world, and that the few remaining people struggle to survive in the post-apocalyptic world, where social, political, cultural, religious, and other institutions and beliefs are no longer relevant or functional. The major event that alters the course of the planet could be a war, pandemic, natural calamity, etc. But *The Road* transformed the genre by changing or reusing some tropes. For example, *The Road* skips over the specifics of how the world ended and instead speculates on what might happen to people who are still living after the world passed away ten years earlier. McCarthy asserts that “his money is on people destroying each other environmental catastrophe kicks in,” despite the fact that he believes a meteor strike will bring about the end of the world (Kushner, 2007, p. 49). A lifeless homochromatic landscape devoid of warmth, color, the sun, and light is all that's left of the earth. gray, rain, ash, and soot.

The Road explores the psychology of morality and human nature in a post-apocalyptic world of soot, ash, and darkness where there is no hope. The man experiences flashbacks in which he recalls a conversation with his now-deceased wife:

MAN. We're survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

WIFE. Survivors? she said.

MAN. Yes.

WIFE. What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film. (p. 47)

The wife's statement that they don't think of themselves as survivors but rather as “walking dead in a horror picture says a lot about the survivors' psychological state. The man's wife alludes to recent American (post-)apocalyptic films. This allusion suggests a connection between the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* and the prevailing anxieties. Whatever the underlying reason for the end of the world in *The Road* may be, according to Cooper (2011), “what has driven humanity to its doom is the internal corruption of people who pursued their own power for too long, who set their own wants above those of others” (p. 222).

Morality

The novel begins with a man remembering his nightmare when he wakes up in the middle of the night.

In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand... Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 3-4)

This mysterious translucent creature of the night represents humanity as a metaphor for “humanity's role in its own annihilation” (Cooper, 2011, p. 221). The monster is described as being “pale and bare and translucent,” allowing the guy and readers to glimpse its inner workings and the true nature of humanity with its blind eyes living in the never-ending night. The father and the boy “carrying the fire” stand in contrast to the darkness in which other people drown. Through the course of the narrative, the man tells his son several times that they are “carrying the fire” (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 3-4 pp. 70, 100, 182, 238), or in the final scenes, as he is about to die, he tells the boy that he must “carry the fire” (p. 234)—a metaphor for the “good guys” in a primitive world devoid of culture, law, civilization, food, and morality, according to Cooper (2011, p. 221). Despite this, it is safe to claim that humans still have culture, law, and morality in this lawless post-apocalyptic world. However, their nature has changed so much that it is no longer recognizable to us, as morality and culture are influenced by nature and surroundings. The father and son in *The Road* maintain their pre-apocalyptic morals and see themselves as the “good guys” despite the vast changes in nature, the environment, and consequently, culture and morals. In contrast, other survivors have adopted new lifestyles, such as animalism and even worse cannibalism.

Since culture is a byproduct of nature and is a component of human nature, as was previously said, culture and nature do not contradict one another. Since human behavior is fundamentally derived from physical structures, nature and evolution can still shape it. Fixed action patterns are “stereotypic behavioral sequences an animal follows after being activated by a well-defined stimulus,” and they are intrinsic traits shared by humans and other animals (Buss, 2005, p. 31). Despite being innate, some action patterns are not set in stone. These behaviors alter in response to various environments and situations that trigger various responses.

The moral sensibility of the father and son in the book is pre-apocalyptic. While some favor the behaviors that were perceived as “bad” in the pre-apocalyptic

environment, culture, and society, they favor and moralize those particular activities that were recognized as "good" in those settings. But as a result of the apocalypse, nature and the environment have changed, forcing other humans to find new methods to survive. Evolutionary psychologists contend that people are fundamentally capable of both virtue and evil. A portion of this goodness is inherent and results from premoral feelings that everyone has, albeit to varying degrees. Some of the premolars are shared by even the "evil characters" with parents and sons. McCarthy does not focus on other individuals and does not provide details about their clans or little civilizations, but one scene is sufficient to alert readers about their immorality: The man witnesses a group of cannibals searching for further individuals to hunt while he is camped out next to the road. cannibal beings who are organized and have a moral sense of "cooperation" among themselves. When a cannibal inadvertently stumbles onto the father and son as they are trying to hide in the woods, the father promptly kidnaps him and demands information about their whereabouts and available supplies. Due to the pre-mortality of "deception detection," "community concern," and his society's laws, the cannibal refuses to provide him with any information. According to their standards, members of his clan may describe his actions as moral. Premoral sentiments are generally present in all cultures and societies since they are inherent to human nature and the product of millions of years of evolution. The other aspect of goodness comes from cultural factors that can be controlled depending on the situation. The father and son remain moral and charitable despite the vast, all-encompassing shift in the world, and by doing so, they feel righteous and pleased.

The analogy between culture and clothing is similar to Frans de Waal's "veneer theory": morality is a veneer layer that is derived from culture; it is a cultural overlay. Humans are naturally greedy. Veneer theorists contend that morality cannot evolve because it is a construct that can alter depending on the situation and that morality and kindness in people are really "a thin veneer covering an otherwise greedy and brutish [human] character" (De Waal et al., 2009, p. 6). The principal interpreter of Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, incorrectly stated that "nature is not a role model for human existence; humans are called upon to build viable ethics and abide by them even in the face of the chaos of nature" (Guerin et al., 2011, p. 150). This hypothesis claims that with the devastating shift in culture, assuming there is any, among the "bad guys" in *The Road*, the essence of morality also shifts fundamentally in line with the altered civilization.

De Waal (2009) and Shermer (2004), evolutionary psychologists who contend that morality is a product of evolution, reject the veneer theory. They don't merely mean genetic or physical evolution when they say "evolution." They imply that

human beings are all “subject to laws of nature and forces of culture and history that influence our thinking..., behaviors” (Shermer, p.6), as well as to morality and basic human nature. To put it more precisely, the link between nature and culture produces morality. Morality, in other words, is a byproduct of social evolution. "Can individuals for generations maintain behavior that is out of character, like a shoal of piranhas that decides to turn vegetarian?" asks De Waal in reference to Huxley's idea and veneer theory in general. How far does a change like that go? Whether this would make us look good on the surface yet be evil on the inside (De Waal et al., p. 8).

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

The boy is partly feral and is unfamiliar with many fundamental cultural structures, society's symbols, and trappings, in general, of life in the pre-apocalyptic world. He was born after the apocalypse that brought an end to human civilization. When he hears his father use phrases like "as the crow flies" or the word "states," which were formerly fundamental knowledge to someone living in a pre-apocalyptic world, he becomes perplexed. In a world where all the birds have died and nobody asks for directions or states anymore, these words and proverbs have no practical application. For instance, they come across a house in one scene when the father is standing and gazing at it. The son inquires, "Papa, what is this place?" The dad responds, "It's the house where I grew up" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 21). The father explains to his son, who is waiting outside, that "here is where we used to have Christmas when I was a youngster. . . . Me and my sisters would sit by the fire here [in the yard] on chilly winter nights when the electricity was out due to a storm to finish our homework (p. 22). The youngster finds it challenging to comprehend concepts like "Christmas," "electricity," and "homework." The confused look in his son's eyes that "[w]atched shapes claiming him he could not see" is visible to the parent (p. 22). Despite leading a primitive life and feeling uncomfortable hearing about the past, the youngster is fixated on the pre-apocalyptic tales his father tells him. He aspires to be like the fictional heroes.

The youngster is affected by the pre-apocalyptic world as seen by the tales his father tells him, tales with pre-apocalyptic morals that are useless in this new reality. According to Michelle Sugiyama's theory, stories provide people with fictitious experiences that can teach them about their surroundings and all of their components, including their hazards, phobias, geography, history, people, and culture. But in this new world, which is full of fresh threats and anxieties and in which the history, culture, values, and morals of the pre-apocalyptic world are no longer relevant, the stories the man tells his kid are no longer useful.

Without knowing what the pre-apocalyptic world looked like, the boy grew up hearing legends about it. He so based his morality on his father's tales and the valiant actions of the virtuous characters. The youngster feels that he should act in accordance with the moral norms of the stories, despite the fact that his father warns him to be cautious, avoid strangers, and if at all possible, run from them. His compassion for other people, therefore, depends not just on his inherent goodness but also on the values he learned from the stories. Based on his moral convictions, the youngster exhibits concern at some of his father's decisions in the first half of the novel until the middle. For example, when his father refuses to assist Ely, the son successfully convinces him to do so. When the boy tries to ask the father whether Ely may stay with them or not, the father responds, "I know what the question is, and the answer is no. Should we retain him? No, we can't (p. 138).

The boy's morality, therefore, shifts when on the street and interacting with the environment, based on different contextual triggers that are favorable to adaptation and survival. His actions today are the product of the interaction between his pre-apocalyptic ideals, surroundings, and intrinsic relative morality.

Fitting into this new world is a factor that should also be taken into account. If the end of the world had given mankind access to at least life-sustaining elements, then generation after generation of people could gradually adapt to the physical world. However, McCarthy's postapocalyptic world is so severe that not even food is permitted.

In the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, "survival of the fittest"—competition for food supplies, reproductive opportunities, and safe spaces—is being practiced. After the cataclysmic event that devastated life on Earth ten years prior (this is not "life as we know it," but life in its truest sense), people almost ran out of food, their reproductive potential almost expired, and their secure possessions were destroyed. Except for those who commit cannibalism in order to survive, human hope for survival is becoming an unachievable ideal. Human genes can become extremely selfish when their survival is in jeopardy in order to protect the body in which they are housed. If

possible, the genes will induce the body to reproduce in order to duplicate themselves and pass on. Biologically speaking, those who are less moral than the others and also those who have a stronger determination to survive in this "barren, silent, godless" (p. 4) world have a better chance of surviving longer.

Even after passing away, the father maintained his good character and passed the torch to his son, a messiah who can restore order to a fallen planet. In terms of genetic transmission from his father, "the fire" is defined. According to McCarthy, this inheritance is passed "from man to man throughout all time" (p. 241). Despite the fact that the guy passes away at the novel's conclusion, "evolutionary fitness" and "gene's-eye thinking" allow us to see that the man succeeds in passing on his genes to future generations as well as in assisting his son—who shares 50% of his genes—in surviving. But for what purpose? Because it depicts a now-extinct species of trout called the brook trout, this finale is by no means joyous. The disappearance of the trout shows both that things will not return to normal and that the boy's heroic morals might become less apparent in a desolate world that is too damaged to endure. Being virtuous in the face of unstoppable evil is what McCarthy strives to personify. The boy's kindness in the face of horror implies that, even if this planet is too gravely afflicted to be healed, there is still worth in life—and that value comes in a categorical rejection of fear-based behavior, according to Lydia Cooper (2011, p. 234).

Parent-Child Bond

The Road's first line makes it clear that the father-son tie is the book's central theme and that all other themes are derived from it: "When he woke up in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the boy lying beside him." His hand delicately rose and sank with each priceless breath (p. 3). Along with keeping the novel as realistic as possible, another reason he avoids discussing the origin of the apocalypse is that he prefers to concentrate on the father and son's struggle to survive in an immoral society and the father's love for his son, who serves as the story's emotional center.

The Road captures McCarthy's bond with his kid. The Road is replete with instances of sacrifice and "parental investment," which refers to any parental expenditure that favors one kid at the expense of parents' capacity to invest in other elements of fitness (Walker, 2013, p. 46). The father views his son as a life force and guards him with obsession. McCarthy discloses the true nature of his character and demonstrates his love for his son, whose existence serves as the man's "warrant" for continuing to live. Numerous talks between McCarthy and his son John are quoted

verbatim in the book, McCarthy informs Jurgensen (2009), and includes the following examples "The boy said, "what would you do if I died?" The father said, "if you died I would want to die too," and the boy said, "So you could be with me?" The man said, "Yes. So I could be with you" (p. 9).

Parenting stands out as the clearest illustration of non-reciprocal benevolence when viewed through the lens of evolutionary psychology. In all animals that take care of their young, parents give assistance for which they never plan on receiving payment. But it is entirely non-reciprocal that humans are the only species that "intensively and permanently care for their children than any other species" (Evans, 2000, p. 73).

According to the narrative, the mother's decision to kill herself was not taken out of cowardice but rather out of sacrifice. She committed suicide so that she wouldn't be a burden on her son and spouse and to increase their chances of survival. She is mentally and physically spent as her husband gets ready to leave for the South, and she is aware that this weakness will leave the three of them open to attack by the cannibals. She is also aware that her husband has only two bullets remaining in his gun after eight years of living a life of survival, consumed with fear and struggle. The family constantly worries about being kidnapped, raped, killed, and eaten. If the cannibals find them, the father will use the two remaining bullets as a last resort to kill the son and then himself (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 47–49).

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

The father thinks that his death is getting closer as they endure the trials of their journey. The boy inquires about survival, hope for life, and the continuation of human existence throughout the entire book. When the son asks his father earlier in the book if there could be fish in the lake, the father simply replies, "There's nothing in the lake" (p. 17). When the son later asks, "What if some good folks came?" (p. 127), his father responds that it is unlikely. The youngster says, "Maybe there's a[nother] father and his little boy," in a declarative phrase once more (p. 182). Once more, the father dismisses the notion as implausible. However, the son informs his father on page 205 that "There

could be [good] people alive elsewhere." Now that death is imminent, the worried father responds in the affirmative, "There are people, and we'll find the" (p. 206). When the son meets a family who are "nice guys" after his father's passing, the father's desperate desire to protect his kid is revealed in this sentence, which he knows will come true. This is a reflection of McCarthy's advanced age and stems from the worry that he won't live long enough to defend his John. McCarthy is "carrying the fire," and even though he thinks that the world will never be restored right again, he fervently hopes that after his death, the son will find nice people in this vicious environment.

Conclusion

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

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

In conclusion, this paper shows McCarthy's *The Road* is heavily dependent on and constrained by moral qualities, human nature, and common human fears and needs when interpreted in the context of literary Darwinism. The conduct of this paper has associations with researchers, academics, and readers employed in collaborations with parenting and human morals.

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