
CORMAC MCCARTHY'S "THE ROAD" AS A WAY OUT

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Abstract

Literature and art have always been reflections of the reality of each era. By analysing them we can become acquainted with the socio-political circumstances of the time, or even explore the concerns and fears of the population. Cormac McCarthy's last novel *The Road* portrays a post-apocalyptic world where all flora and fauna have been blown to smithereens, and the few remaining survivors follow a road longing for a better future. The American author describes an uninhabitable grey world with clear dystopian features, building a novel that could be considered to be a critique towards the current environmental issue, and even as a warning. Overall, I will focus on the role of place and nature in a post-apocalyptic society, analysing their interaction with human relationships and moral values. In order to understand all the factors that influence the survival of the main characters in the novel, I will follow three different methodologies. Firstly, I will analyse the novel as a dystopian story through Utopian Studies, highlighting McCarthy's use of place to create a dystopian atmosphere. Thus, I will make use of an ecocritical approach in order to analyse the absence of nature and its consequences in human behaviour. Thirdly, focusing on a more social aspect, I will examine the cultural symbolism of such elements as the road or the myth of the American West, and the contrast between the human values of the two main characters. In summary, through this paper I will conduct an analysis on how McCarthy reflects current socio-political and environmental concerns through a touching story in which a devastated landscape leads to a behavioural shift, emphasising the role of nature and place.

Keywords: dystopia, survival, *The Road*, environment, American West

Introduction

The destruction of the environment causes a "behavioral mutation" in the characters, since they have no alternative but to follow the road. Thence, Kollin (157) considers this novel to be "a narrative that is part ecodystopian fiction and part American road novel" (cited in Blidariu 60). Thus, McCarthy not only emphasizes the devastated nature, but also the symbol of the road that leads the characters towards their objective. I claim that McCarthy makes an ironic use of

the concept of the road, since, in contrast to the adventurous journeys that the myth of the West represents, the characters of the novel do not consider this element to be their liberator. They have no joy of traveling, they have not chosen to leave their home, they have no place to return to. They can only follow the road, hoping to find a better place; it is their way out. The novel begins and ends on the road, and the narration is centered on the path, which seems endless. The road is a constant element in the story, and creates a feeling of continuity of a long lasting and hard journey, which is emphasized by the formal characteristics of the novel. The plainness and crudity of the dialogues, the lack of chapters and the use of polysyndeton match the tone of the story: they slow down the reading, symbolizing the rhythm in which the protagonists move, highlighting their suffering, deterioration and weakness.

Discussion

Along the road, father and son are kept motivated thanks to the idea that they will reach the south coast. Their main aim, however, is not to build a new life in the southern coast, since they cannot afford to think of long term purposes: there are “[n]o lists of things to be done. (...) There is no later. This is later” (McCarthy 54). Their empty dream is limited to surviving the day, they cannot think ahead, and they cannot look into the past either, since everything they knew is now destroyed.

Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be? (McCarthy 53-54)

After expressing these words, the father whispers to his son: “I have you”. Surrounded by darkness, and threatened by a fatal fate, the son rekindles the fire of hope in the father’s heart. His wife lamented her only hope was “for eternal nothingness” (McCarthy 57). Despite her warnings and tragic death, the father made the decision to stay alive, devoting his remaining days to save his son, as he knows he himself will soon die due to his illness, provoked by the extremely polluted air. Therefore, the boy could be considered to be the personification of hope in the story. McCarthy wants to emphasize the fact that even in a dead-end world in which every inch is irredeemably destroyed, and having embraced their despairing reality, there is no place for redemption, which is a valiant decision: “What’s the bravest thing you ever did? / He spat into the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said” (McCarthy 272). The complexity of the inner feelings of the characters, who contradictorily feel hope and despair, contrasts with the void of the environment, which is the source of their problems.

During the journey, grimness provokes the characters to ponder on their values, even considering the idea of death: “Do you wish you would die? / No. But I might wish I had died” (McCarthy 169). All the survivors prefer they would not have to live in a devastated world, ergo, they wish they died before the cataclysm. Yet they are alive, thus their instinct urges them to survive: “Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” (McCarthy 169). Contradictions arise again: they are hopeful they will survive and reach the south, yet at the same time they know the life that awaits them is not worth all the suffering. In these circumstances, suicide is occasionally idealized, referred to as a salvation, as a privilege; not as a dark ending, but as a relief from a cruel life. The father even teaches his son how to kill himself in the case he is captured by “the bad guys”:

He took the boy's hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered. Take it. The boy was terrified. He put his arm around him and held him. His body so thin. Don't be afraid, he said. If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand?

I think so.

No. Do you understand?

Yes.

Say yes I do Papa.

Yes I do Papa.

He looked down at him. All he saw was terror. He took the gun from him. No you don't, he said.

I don't know what to do, Papa. I don't know what to do. (McCarthy 112-113)

This scene is an instance of the learning process the man and the boy go through during their journey. Along the novel the reader can notice that, due the difficulties of the way, both protagonists embody a personal development in which they ponder the value of life. Nevertheless, I believe that the road does not equally influence the characters. On the one hand, I would assert that for the father, the road is a hopeless and inevitable way towards death. Therefore, his development is more related to a spiritual awareness, which will permit him to die in peace once he fulfills his objective of leading his beloved son to a safer place in the south. He is, from the beginning, conscious of the gravity of his illness, and at the end, McCarthy describes: “Coughing. He bent over, holding his knees. Taste of blood. The slow surf crawled and seethed in the dark and he thought about his life but there was no life to think about and after a while he walked back.” (154). For the son, on the other hand, there is still a life to think about. Hence, I could uphold that the adventures they live on the road are a source of knowledge. Likewise, his personal development could be compared to rites of passage. In

other words, the road is a watershed in the boy's life: he is learning how to survive, how to take responsibility for his actions, and how to morally judge the good and the bad. In the end, after his father passes away, he is obliged to accept his loneliness and to keep going. Despite his young age, he is unintentionally forced to comply with adult responsibilities, adapting to the social circumstances. Regarding this idea, I even consider *The Road* to be a Bildungsroman ('education novel' or 'coming-of-age story'), since, even if the psychological and moral growth is not the axis of the story, it is inarguable that the characters, specially the boy, experience an inner change.

Conclusion

The need for mobility in the novel is not motivated by an individual wish for personal development and growth as it could be the case of the adventurers of the classical myth of the West. Nevertheless, the extreme circumstances do not only have an impact on their physical condition, but also in their minds. Among these extreme circumstances, apart from the remains from the old world, such as the road, McCarthy emphasizes the relevance of the absent environmental elements in the novel.

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