

**The American Nightmare: America's
Future as a Wasteland in Cormac
McCarthy's *The Road* (2007)
An Ecocritical Study**

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Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents an awesome future vision of America as a wasteland. It predicts the American nightmare in the future. There is unknown catastrophe has ruined the earth and destroyed human civilization. McCarthy believes that human beings are constantly aware of the influence of nature on their lives in the form of the air they breathe, the water they drink and the food they eat. Ecocriticism is an appropriate critical approach to *The Road* because there is a strong presence of nature and environment throughout his work; and because of the great influence of nature and environment on the thoughts and actions of the characters. All over the scenes of the novel from the very beginning till the end the terrifying atmosphere dominates the events. McCarthy focuses only on the enmity of nature for human beings by looking at the negative side. He chooses to talk about American nightmare instead of American dream. He seems to warn the Americans not to feel safe all the time depending on what is called the American Dream which can be changed to American nightmare.

Keywords: McCarthy, *The Road*, ecocriticism, nature, environment, ecology, Setting, Wasteland, nightmare.

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy (1933) is a contemporary American novelist whose novels often bear violent and relentless visions about mysterious parts of humanity. Most of his novels delineate the relationship of man to nature and environment; and how far both affect man negatively. He is often preoccupied with uncovering the hidden nature of the universe. He believes that human beings are always aware of the influence of nature on their lives in the form of air, food and drink. But what if human beings lose good provisions of nature? What if nature and environment overturn against man?

This paper discusses Cormac McCarthy's awesome future vision of America as a wasteland in his novel, *The Road* (2007) in terms of the theory of ecocriticism. McCarthy's *The Road* is a dull, terrifying story about the future of America. It tells the story of a father and his son's journey across a ruined landscape. Some unknown disaster has hit the world and caused destruction and environmental pollution everywhere. All people have died except some remnants of mankind and a very few surviving dogs. The sky is always covered by dust and toxic particles. The weather is very cold and damp. Aspects of civilization have collapsed; the beauty of the natural world has disappeared; and the few human survivors roam the land in daily search for food. The unnamed father and son live a real nightmare through setting like a wasteland.

The questions of the research

This paper attempts to answer some questions such as: How are nature and environment represented in McCarthy's *The Road*? How to offer an ecological interpretation of McCarthy's *The Road*? What role does the physical-geographical setting play in the structure of the novel? Where are nature and environment placed in the power hierarchy of the events of the novel? How are the issues of environmental disasters and crises reflected in the novel? What about the relationship between nature, environment and characters in McCarthy's *The Road*? How difficult or easy is it to imagine McCarthy's nightmare vision actually happening? What does *The Road* ultimately suggest about McCarthy's awesome future vision of America as hell and wasteland?

Cormac McCarthy's novels in general can be analyzed in terms of the theory of ecocriticism because environment and nature play the major role in the events of the narrative. In *The Road*, environment and nature affect all characters and control the current of all events and scenes from the very beginning till the end. Cormac McCarthy is known for how he incorporates nature into his novels. Various critics see that nature is as much a character in his novels as any human. In many of his works, nature is a central focus.

Ecocriticism is an appropriate critical approach to the novels of Cormac McCarthy for two reasons: the first is the strong presence of nature and environment throughout his works; the second is the important influence that nature and environment have on the thoughts and actions of his characters. James Lilley sees that “the majority of McCarthy's texts engage issues of ecology and environmentalism in much more subtle ways” (Lilley 158).

Ecocriticism sprang from the environmental modern movement of the 1960s which originally came to focus on a few prominent environmental issues and disasters and to identify and criticize the dangerous and damaging effects of human activity on the global environment. There is an increased awareness of how environmental degradation can cause public health threats. The term ‘Ecocriticism’ comes from “Ecology”; and Ecology is concerned with the relationships between living organisms and natural environment. Donald Hughes' comment about ecology is quite noteworthy:

Human ecology is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its

water, both fresh and salt; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and plants, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun (Hughes 3).

The word “ecocriticism” first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. However, it was only in the 1990s that ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics (Volkmann 370). In his essay William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as

the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years (Rueckert 107).

Ecocriticism is also known as environmental criticism in the field of literary study that considers the relationship that human beings have to the environment. It is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man’s relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. Environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts. Ecocriticism analyzes ecological disasters and the important environmental problems that humankind faces such as:

nuclear war, depletion of valuable natural resources, population explosion, proliferation of exploitative

technologies, conquest of space preliminary to using it as a garbage dump, pollution, extinction of species (though not a human problem) among others (Mambrol).

Ecocriticism discusses the surroundings and environmental conditions that play a major role in a story.

As ecocriticism is the study of literature in relation to environment, it highlights connections between literature, culture, and human physical environment. It is related to environmentalism as a social movement or an ideology which focused on the welfare of the environment. Dana Lovelady defines Environmentalism:

Environmentalism seeks to protect and conserve the elements of earth's ecosystem, including water, air, land, animals, and plants, along with entire habitats such as rainforests, deserts and oceans. Concepts dealing with environmental issues include the management of natural resources, overpopulation, commercial logging, urbanization and global warming. ... Environmentalism works to correct the damage as well as prevent future destruction (Lovelady 1).

Contemporary environmental writers show how ecology, environmentalism, and the environmental crisis changed the act of writing about nature. Ecocriticism can be seen as both a product of the modern environmental movement and an outgrowth of an intellectual and aesthetic tradition. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism "as study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell 430). Ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty recognizes this profoundly

different new relationship that humans have developed with the rest of the natural world, stating, “we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems” (Glotfelty, *Defining Ecocritical Theory*). Many ecocritical scholars recognize the need for literary criticism to address the pressing environmental issues of today. One way to do so is to refocus our study of literature on texts in which nature plays a dominant role: “our profession must soon direct its attention to that literature which recognizes and dramatizes the integration of human with natural cycles of life” (Love 235).

If ecocriticism deals with ecological problems like pollution, global warming, climate change, deforestation, and other ecological exploitations, it is associated with the desire to investigate and remedy the current environmental problems.

Ecocriticism is also interested in the study of literature in relation to nature. Nature usually refers to the phenomena of the physical world. It is often taken to mean the “natural environment” or wilderness—wild animals, rocks, forest. Nature is everything in the world that isn’t man-made: grass, trees, the sun, the moon, rivers, seas, valleys, mountains etc. Nature has always proved to be stronger than human. In his article “The Land Ethic”, Aldo Leopold supports this idea: “When I refer to nature, I mean an ecosystem in which humans are not the dominant species or force of environmental change” (Leopold 237).

Given the fact that nature is one of the primary themes of American writing, ecocritics read literature from nature’s perspective and think in a bio-centric way. The American

ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty sees that: “Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and nature through a range of approaches having little in common other than a shared concern with the environment” (Glotfelty, *Ecocriticism Reader* xix). Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as it is clear in the works of poets and other writers all over the ages in almost all cultures of the world. In eco-critical texts, nature features as the main topic or protagonist as in McCarthy’s *The Road*. Ecocritics are concerned about the relationship between people and the natural world. They see that human beings “are connected with nature by ‘blood’ ties and they cannot live outside nature” (Spirkin 83).

Combining traditional literary methodologies with ecological perspectives, ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between characters and place. In defining landscape William Howarth wrote “Landscape is the non-human elements of place—rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air—as well as human perceptions and modifications” (Howarth 69). As regards the methods and goals of ecocriticism, Pramod Nayar sees that: “One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects” (Nayar 23).

In order to address the environmental problems facing the modern world, ecocriticism calls for a range of approaches that share a common concern for the relationship between human and the non-human. Stephanie Sarver sees that

the diversity of ecocritical practice stresses that such criticism should not focus just on trees and rivers that

inhabit texts but also should focus on the “nature inherent in humans and in settings in which humans figure prominently: in dooryards, in cities, and in farms (Sarver 21).

From the standpoint of environmental thought, material ecocriticism is an important field delineated in works of literature. In talking about material ecocriticism as a branch of the ecocritical theory, Kate Wright and Catherine Simpson see that ecocriticism is

a study of the connections between literature and the materiality of the biological world. What is most interesting in ecocritical thought is its attention to the liveliness of texts—the way works of literary art can produce and reproduce environmental effects (Wright 2).

In environmental debates the material role of nature assumes many forms and perspectives. Material Ecocriticism uses biology and other natural sciences to inform how we understand the relations between people and nature. According to Dana Phillips: “the new materialists consider nature as something beyond linguistic construction, stripping of its metaphysical halo that encourages one to think that nature is a merely similarity of the whole” (Phillips 278). Material ecocritics believes that by paying attention to the physical details of the natural world, we will be better analysts of the text, people and everything. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman support this idea:

Indeed, thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the “environment,” which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a “resource” for human use, is, in fact, a world of

fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions (Alaimo 238-39).

In answering the question ‘Why is Material Ecocriticism important to literary criticism?’, Ecocritics see that a character isn’t a character until the reader sees him say and do things in a specific environment. This field also wants us to consider how the physical states of writers affected the way they wrote.

In one of the earliest ecocritical accounts of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, George Monbiot strikes a cautious tone on the novel’s moral significance, seeing it as a warning about the crisis of climate catastrophe and sees that *The Road* is “the most important environmental book ever written... it will change the way you see the world. Cormac McCarthy’s book *The Road* considers what would happen if the world lost its biosphere” (Monbiot 2). Paul Sheehan reads the ecological message more negatively than Monbiot, arguing that McCarthy

makes no attempt to represent, apportion blame for, or even just name the disaster that has ravaged the world. This reluctance effectively transforms the book from a warning (as Monbiot would have it) into an outcome, where effects are of greater import than causes (Murphet 91).

In order to evaluate McCarthy’s environmental ethics, it is important to understand his relationships with environmental philosophy and to understand the common critical view of the dominant Western world. According to Katie McShane environmental ethics is “the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the

environment and its non-human contents” (McShane 17). Dale Jamieson defines environmental philosophy as “the product of concerns arising from diverse quarters: naturalists, scientists and other academics, journalists, and politicians” (Jamieson 249). This means that McCarthy is influenced by the world environmental philosophy which is reflected in the setting of his novels. William Schafer comments on McCarthy’s quality of his landscapes:

One of McCarthy’s astonishing talents is the intensely evocative quality of his landscapes and dramas of animal life. Fully as important as the human actions in the story are animals which emerge as more than symbolic—they are an analogical extension of the story of man in the landscape (Schafer 108).

This paper illustrates the environmental awareness in McCarthy’s *The Road* in which there is a growth of understanding and consciousness toward the biophysical environment. In the first scene of *The Road*, McCarthy could show the confusion and hopelessness of his lifeless desolate world. He is able to show his pessimism while allowing the reader to see more beyond it. If human beings are used to being fed by nature with everything good like vegetation, the devastated nature of *The Road* ceases to give anything for the survivors, only providing last shelter for the dead: “the blasted landscape, with its ‘wasted country’ and its stagnant river choked with ‘dead reeds,’ seems haunted by Eliot’s ‘dead land’ with its ‘roots that clutch” (Cooper 220).

As setting is an important element of any novel, it serves to enhance the mood of the story, or simply to establish the time and place of the events. The horrible landscape of *The*

Road causes critics to see that it is a horror novel. Horror writers prefer the contrast of the horrible event against an everyday scene. In *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Jerry Williamson writes, “when the ordinary is invaded by the terrifying extraordinary, horror happens” (Williamson 71). The ruined setting of *The Road* is covered with terrible, revealing artifacts as described by McCarthy:

There are old newspapers. There is one lone bottle of Coca-Cola, still absurdly fizzy when all else is dust. There are charred corpses frozen in their final postures, like the long-dead man who sits on a porch like a straw man set out to announce some holiday (*The Road* 201).

The unknown catastrophe disrupted civilization and turned most of the people that are still alive into cannibalistic savages. The conditions they face are harsh, unkind and pitiless: rotted corpses, landscapes devastated by fire, ash, isolation, abandoned towns and houses and a long road to travel. Nothing moves in the ravaged landscape except the ash spread everywhere. When the snow falls it is gray. The sky is dark. The two travelers – the Man and the Boy – are among the few living creatures remaining on earth who have not been driven to murder, rape, and cannibalism. They struggle to survive in the harsh weather with little food. This bad atmosphere makes Ron Charles see that “*The Road* is a frightening, profound tale that drags us into places we don’t want to go, forces us to think about questions we don’t want to ask” (Charles). And Janet Maslin comments also on the weather of *The Road*: “The weather is bitter, the landscape colorless, the threat of starvation imminent. There is also the occasional interloper or ominous relic, since the road is not entirely abandoned” (Maslin).

Throughout the novel, McCarthy presents a geography of a world without borders. The world is indistinct. People finally live in a borderless world as seen by Patrick O'Connor:

It is impossible to draw an *absolute* distinction from the global nihilism which *The Road's* characters inhabit. This is because all characters are susceptible to the material negativity upon which the form, content, and narration of the novel are based (O'Connor 3).

All over the scenes of the novel from the very beginning till the end the terrifying atmosphere dominates the events. When it rains, the rain is full of ash. The places The Man and The Boy pass through are ugly, terrifying and obnoxious. The world reflects a vision of horrid countryside and repulsive cities:

The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell (*The Road* 181).

It is a physically devastated and morally bankrupted world. Plants and animals are dead or dying. Some of the few human survivors even eat each other alive. The relentless competition for survival causes moral disintegration and loss of humanity. Consequently, society regresses to its primitive state when people driven by instincts fight for food and struggles for survival like animals. As Robert Brinkmeyer notes, in that wasteland “all questions of right and wrong, of the ethical and spiritual are subsumed in the everyday struggle to survive” (Brinkmeyer 41).

In *The Road*, McCarthy focuses only on the enmity of nature for human beings by looking at the negative side. This is because he seems to warn the Americans not to feel safe all the time depending on what is called the American Dream which can be changed to American nightmare. As an enemy, Hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes can have long-term consequences as great numbers of people are killed and others become homeless. These natural disasters cause people to live in less safe environments and in less safe shelter. In McCarthy's *The Road*, Nature acts as an enemy because it is always frightening as violence and evil become rousing and rampant: "murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (*The Road* 152). An example of the frightening and fearful scenes in the memory of the Man is his wife's suicide because she could not endure the evil outcome occurred to environment. She was pregnant when the world exploded, and the boy was born a few days after she and the Man "watched distant cities burn." Ultimately, she gave up and took a bullet: "She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift" (*The Road* 94). As Andrew Hoberek notes, "the wife committed suicide ... not because she is a weak woman but because she succumbed to a deadening coincidence between the imagination and reality" (Hoberek 494). In other words, what the mother experienced between imagination and reality is her inability to verbalize and create an understanding of what is happening in nature.

Alan Warner sees that the reason for this frightening and evil setting of the novel concerns McCarthy's choice of talking about American nightmare instead of American dream:

We should remember that the history of Cormac McCarthy and his achievement is not an American dream... Now he has given us his great American nightmare. ... *The Road* affirms belief in the tender pricelessness of the here and now. In creating an exquisite nightmare, it does not add to the cruelty and ugliness of our times; it warns us now how much we have to lose (Warner).

Warner sees that McCarthy completely achieves physical and metaphysical hell in the imagination of the reader because the father seeks refuge in dangerously needy and exquisite recollections of a lost world: “McCarthy makes us ache with nostalgia for restored normality. ... His central character can adopt a universal belligerence and misanthropy (Warner).

Hell is incarnated in the Man’s dreams for he wakes “in the woods” and recalls his dream, in which he and his son are “like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast”. The Man’s dreams include “a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless” before turning to “lurch away” (*The Road* 3-4).

What the reader can get from the novel is that nature is the most awesome destroyer of all. Natural disasters are the major adverse events resulting from natural processes of the Earth; examples are floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other geologic processes. These natural disasters occurred regularly, and cannot be ascribed to the actions of humans.

In *The Road* McCarthy imagines a future in which no hope remains, but in which the father and his son are

sustained by love which gives them hope in the face of hopelessness. The father and his son move through the ruins searching for food and shelter, trying to keep safe from murderous roaming bands. They have only a pistol to defend themselves, very little food and the clothes they are wearing. Surviving the wasteland requires more than food and shelter. When starvation, coldness and violence threaten people's life; loss of hope also kills. McCarthy envisions a postapocalyptic scenario. Cities have been destroyed, plants and animals have died and few humans survive. The sun is hidden by ash, and it is winter. With very rare food, many of the living people have turned to cannibalism. Janet Maslin evaluates the scene: "McCarthy has summoned his fiercest visions to invoke the devastation. He gives voice to the unspeakable in a terse cautionary tale that is too potent to be numbing, despite the stupefying ravages it describes" (Maslin). This terrifying atmosphere may be a sort of punishment to man as noted by Max Oelschlaeger who sees that suffering starts with Man's creation:

Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden is also tacitly anthropocentric; because of the actions of two humans, this world is a fallen place designed to inflict pain, suffering, and death on humans as punishment for their disobedience to God. Nature, in essence, is punishment for sin (Oelschlaeger 67).

The horrible setting of *The Road* is one in which goodness is absent. Living objects in the reader's imagination, are soon turned to dust: "The trees as dead as any. He picked up one of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder" (*The Road* 196). Various scenes may be seen as recurrent images of the relentless living world of the

father and son that transform their world into fading and fragile memories figured in burned remains.

McCarthy simply names the novel after the dominant setting: *The Road*. This title is a reflection of the novel's theme of transience. The road is a desolate, transient thing full of danger. The road can be thought of as both an actual, physical setting and a mental state. Notice that the characters in *The Road* never stay longer than a week in any one house or shelter before getting back on the road. All houses have been abandoned; domestic life has been obliterated. It can be guessed that McCarthy's title and theme of the novel have a reference in the lyrics of the English singer and songwriter Chris Rea "The Road to Hell" released in 1989. In part one of this poem Rea says:

I saw a woman

By the side of the road ...

She said 'son what are you doing here?

My fear for you has turned me in my grave' ...

She said 'son this is the road to hell'

On your journey cross the wilderness

From the desert to the well

You have strayed upon the motorway to hell (Rea)

The woman here refers to the Boy's mother who committed suicide out of fear. If the title points to the American highway, the reader may also ask just where the characters end up. It is possible they don't end up anywhere. Their goal of reaching the southern coast turns out to be an empty one. McCarty describes the road as follows:

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 (*The Road* 110).

This dull description reveals the utter indifference of the universe to the plight of man. The earth has left no future or no means of survival or compensation for its survivors. Even the sun is blindly indifferent in the midst of the “crushing black vacuum of the universe,” which extends far beyond the human world of just the earth and the sun. In this terrifying space, both nature and civilization are in ruins:

Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road ... A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned (*The Road* 6).

Not only does the road make up most of the setting in the novel, but it also depicts the dangers of the new wasteland. The road symbolizes the journey between life and death, hope and loss. Death seemed like the only prevailing thing on the road. All over the events we know that the trees are dying and falling down around the father and son. The characters spend so much time on the road – and McCarthy describes the road so well – that it hovers over the novel as a major image. In his article “Cormac McCarthy: The road to hell”, Alan Warner describes the scene of the novel:

America - and presumably the world - has suffered an apocalypse the nature of which is unclear ... The center of the world is sickened. Earthquakes shunt, fire storms smear a “cauterized terrain”, the ash-filled air requires slipshod veils to cover the mouth. Nature revolts. The ruined world is long plundered, with canned food and good shoes the ultimate aspiration (Warner).

Throughout the entire novel, the two main characters are never named. They are called The Man and The Boy. Being nameless makes them seem less human or makes them universal as they may symbolize any man and any boy. They have nothing: food, shelter, safety, and not even a means of being identified. They have just a pistol to defend themselves against the lawless bands that stalk the road. The Man symbolizes devotion to The Boy. The father is convinced he is “appointed by God” to care for the child (*The Road* 80). The boy is a symbol of inherent goodness. However, this goodness is brittle and fragile, even if inherent. The Man identifies his son as his “warrant” – which means the child provides him with a reason to live: “He knew that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke.” (*The Road* 3). The Man’s thoughts always return to The Boy. Everything The Man does seems to be done out of consideration for The Boy – to educate him, feed him, keep him safe, protect him, or keep him warm. The Boy radiates empathy. He seems to hold the last remains of humanity left in this fallen world. He is the hope in a world that has become Hell and wasteland. He truly personifies hope on a damned planet. He symbolizes the only remaining type of love on earth in time of disaster that leads to extinction. Despite their hardships, the man and the child

remain determined to survive, reaffirming to themselves that they are the “good guys” who do not seek to harm others.

Fire is a recurrent image in *The Road*. It is an integral component of the ecological system. The ecologists use fire’s severity to refer to the impact that a fire has on an ecosystem. In *The Road* fire plays a major role in shaping the ecology and environment of people. The fire here is not a literal fire. It is a symbolic fire representing humanity’s decency, kindness and strength. The father asks his son over and over to carry the fire. The fire seems to symbolize the basic energy, power, passion and creativity that have been destroyed in the world of *The Road*. The fire in *The Road* represents civilization and success that have vanished. Without fire the Man and the Boy probably would have frozen to death, so fire could also represent security.

In McCarthy’s *The Road*, the father and his son are traveling towards the south in a post-apocalyptic setting with only the thought of “carrying the fire” within their hearts. The “fire” represents the love that they feel for each other and their strength that’s pushing them forward to carry on with their journey to the south. The “fire” can also represent their hope and faith in a gruesome and decaying world. This fire is a symbol of everlasting hope and human resilience. As he lays dying, The Man tells the Boy to persist, to survive and carry the fire:

You have to carry the fire. I don’t know how to.
Yes, you do. Is the fire real? Yes, it is. Where is it?
I don't know where it is. Yes, you do. It’s inside you.
It always was there. I can see it (*The Road* 234).

The phrase “carrying the fire” is a significant refrain, repeated at several times in the novel between the father and

son and one between the Boy and the family he meets after the man's death. He insists that he should stay alive and never give up in such desolate wasteland because good guys keep trying and they do not give up. Thus "we are carrying the fire" can be understood as we are "the people chosen by God to carry the light on through the darkness, to preserve humanity within as examples" (Søfting 711).

As it is mentioned previously, material ecocriticism is an important field delineated in works of literature. In *The Road* McCarthy uses some symbols that can be analyzed in terms of material ecocriticism. When the Man comes down with a fever, he has some crazy dreams. He recounts a near-visionary childhood memory of men burning snakes. The memory articulates a lot of the complexities of evil – and of fighting against evil – that are present in the book. McCarthy recounts the dream:

The men poured gasoline on them [snakes] and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers (*The Road* 261).

Snakes are an important component of the natural environment. In popular culture snakes commonly symbolize fear. But in some cultures, snakes are fertility symbols. For example, the Hopi tribe of North America performed an

annual snake dance to celebrate the union of Snake Youth (a Sky spirit) and Snake Girl (an Underworld spirit) and to renew the fertility of Nature. During the dance, live snakes were handled and at the end of the dance the snakes were released into the fields to guarantee good crops (Chwalkowski 501-2). In his article “Festivals of the Hopi” Frederick Monsen sees that there is a relationship between these celebrations and nature: “The snake dance is a prayer to the spirits of the clouds, the thunder and the lightning, that the rain may fall on the growing crops” (Monsen 269). In other cultures, snakes symbolized the umbilical cord, joining all humans to Mother Earth. Historically, serpents and snakes represent fertility or a creative life force. They are symbols of rebirth, transformation, immortality, and healing (Davidson 9). Therefore, from the dream of burning snakes, it can be deduced that there is an absence of fertility and transformation for better situation; there is no hope of rebirth either. The meaning behind the dream of burning snakes depends on the dreamer’s personal real-life situation. The Man is in a bad situation as everything around him is destruction. In some Native American cultures, snakes represent wisdom. Dreaming of a snake could mean that there are knowledge and wisdom people seek or answer and try to find. Here, in the dream seen by The Man, the serpents are burnt and this indicates loss of knowledge and wisdom beyond what is happening in environment and nature. Hence, material ecocriticism offers new ways to analyze works of literature through analyzing material things in nature.

Critical readings of the novel interpret this apocalyptic world as a wasteland full of violence and destruction, a world ranging from an environmental and post-nuclear disaster to ultimate destiny of mankind. Several Ecocritics such as Ben

De Bruyn, Elena Dell’Agnese, Tim Edwards, Laura Gruber Godfrey and Christopher Lawrence tend to favor the nuclear weapons hypothesis in interpreting the environmental disaster in *The Road* (Dell’Agnese 327, Edwards 55, De Bruyn 776, Godfrey 163, Lawrence 162). Carl James Grindley, on the other hand, opts for an eschatological hypothesis, interpreting the signs of nuclear winter as a novelization of the effects the final catastrophe which ends the life of mankind on earth (Grindley 11). Cormac McCarthy narrates a post-apocalyptic epic in which he imagines a world where the skies are grey and the ground is torn to pieces. Where there is no civilization present, nor another human being to be seen. He explores the effects of the apocalypse on a father and his son traveling together through a bleak, cloudy, evil world. In such destructive atmosphere the father talks to his son:

Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course, you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died, I would want to die too.

So, you can be with me?

Yes. So, I could be with you.

Okay (*The Road* 11).

McCarthy envisions a postapocalyptic world in which “murder was everywhere upon the land” (*The Road* 181). It is a world dominated by murder, crime, and despair—which have now become necessary for survival. Imagine the air thick with black clouds predominating over the city. Ten feet of snow through which the survivors muddle and a strong gust of wind. The earth continues to be indifferent to the sufferings of its inhabitants. In its own death from whatever

calamity has struck, the earth has left no future, no means of survival or compensation for its survivors.

The novel reduces all human and natural life to the condition of savagery and temporary survival. McCarthy offers a fundamentally tragic and pessimistic world. The material universe offers no meaning or purpose. It is not only that the universe is indifferent; there is also a negativity attached to all things. This “material negativity” persists throughout McCarthy’s novel, haunting all characters, objects and structures. Markus Wierschem interprets McCarthy’s vision:

The full extent of McCarthy’s syncretic vision is revealed in condensed form: the fall of the planet, the decline of civilization and the loss of meaning are inseparable from each other. In the aesthetics of *The Road*, notions of thermodynamic, cultural and informational entropy form a programmatic whole with its apocalyptic and secular dimensions (Wierschem 3).

McCarthy portrays a post-apocalyptic landscape where the scarcity of resources has driven the few survivors to murder, thievery, and even cannibalism. Most of the survivors in *The Road* have turned to cannibalism and murder. The world is covered in ash. Even the sea turned grey. It’s a dull, freezing, bleak, ashen-skied wasteland in which human beings are trying to survive. It is a depiction of the post-apocalyptic world where aspects of human civilization have been obliterated:

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 (*The Road* 75).

In McCarthy's novel the world is disappearing not simply because the world is burned and is still burning as they travel, but because the world is losing its ground and basis in the memory of the father. It is a wasteland upon which hell burns everything:

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is a brilliant evocation of what the world might be like in the times after civilization ends. *The Road* gives us a bare, impossibly brutal world that feels true. It is a place in which any morsel of food is worth scavenging. There is no more manufacturing or farming, and most of the natural world has been killed off, so all that remains are the leftovers of capitalism, and those are fast running out ... [The Man and The Boy] find much to horrify on the road. Anyone they might meet is assumed deadly... Houses, though generally abandoned, are presumed to be literal deathtraps only to be entered under the influence of extreme hunger (Esposito, *The Quarterly Conversation*).

McCarthy's *The Road* answers the major question: what would happen if most of the natural world and most of human life disappeared? Annihilation is the result. Death is a constant phenomenon in *The Road*. There is constant threat of death – from starvation, exposure, illness, or murder. Death and the specter of death pervade *The Road* from the

onset through descriptions of the landscape and environment. The earth is already steeped in death and ashes. Most living creatures and plants have not survived the disaster that has destroyed civilization. Amidst the cruel nature, The Man and The Boy often find themselves on the brink of death:

The falling snow curtained them about. There was no way to see anything at either side of the road. He was coughing again and the boy was shivering, the two of them side by side under the sheet of plastic (*The Road* 144)

Therefore, in this hellish deadly setting, death is lurking around every bend in the road, in every house and every pasture:

He [The Man] was beginning to think that death was finally upon them and that they should find some place to hide where they would not be found. There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably (*The Road* 197).

Sometimes when The Man wakes up in the middle of the night, he feels like he's woken up in a grave. The landscape is like a mass grave which is a pretty accurate metaphor for the setting of the novel:

At night when we woke coughing, he'd sit up with his hand pushed over his head against the blackness. Like a man waking in a grave... Many had died in a cholera epidemic and they'd been buried in haste in wooden boxes and the boxes were rotting and falling open. The dead came to light lying on their sides with their legs drawn up and some lay on their stomachs (*The Road* 294).

This landscape in *The Road* recalls the “stony rubbish” of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and invokes the “rough beast” from Yeats’s “The Second Coming.” McCarthy depicts the image of losing one’s way in the middle of life, of things falling apart, of life as a wasteland, of having lost Paradise. *The Road* depicts “the wasteland” as a metaphor, a world in which metaphor has become fact, in which Eliot’s spiritual “wasteland” is embodied in America as a “waste country”.

The novel’s last image in its last paragraph recalls a time when “there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them in the amber current” (*The Road* 286). Why does McCarthy end the novel with the image of trout in mountain streams? Some critics interpret the last image in the novel: “The novel’s last image of brook trout is an admonitory epitaph of what could yet be lost, in which the narrator occupies a position outside a possible future imagined as time passed” (Schaub 153).

Few critics are inclined to call the novel’s ending hopeful because throughout the whole book *The Man and The Boy* have been looking forward to finding “good guys” but they never seem to find them. That is, until the last few pages, when *The Boy* finds them. They are the people who took him after his father’s death. This ending may suggest that society will rebuild itself. In one way or another, *The Road* can be seen as an ultimately hopeful and redemptive story about the power of life or love to continue in the face of destruction. *The Man* who died represents the end of an elder generation whereas the *Boy* who is still alive represents the coming generation. About the ending of the novel, Rick Elmore and Jonathan Elmore ask some questions and answer them: “What is the moral of *The Road*, and, particularly, what if anything is the lesson of the novel’s conclusion? ... Is *The*

Road a Christian allegory, a critique of capitalism, or a meditation on the indifference of the universe?” The answer came directly by Elmore:

a closer investigation of the historical and cultural setting of *The Road* and a detailed reading of the novel’s conclusion demonstrate that *The Road* is perhaps McCarthy’s most didactic novel, laying out direct ethical imperatives ... in the figure of the boy, McCarthy puts forward an ethical ethos for survival after the end of the world, an ethos for how humanity might live after, or perhaps even avoid, the eco-catastrophe that so clearly looms in our own immediate present and lingers in the novel’s immediate past (Elmore 133).

There are various interpretations to the ending of the novel. some critics like Ashley Kunsu see that the ending is ambiguous: “nobody seems quite sure what to make of the ending, which also hums with mystery” (Kunsu 67). Sean Hermanson supports the idea of ambiguity:

Perhaps it is also implied that the boy dies along with the new group, since they also can only prolong their ultimate demise. Or perhaps there is no ending in the conventional sense, and the reader is left to conjecture possibilities (Hermanson 4).

Others, like Christopher Walsh, see that *The Road* “mirrors the dystopian moment of its composition and publication which was characterized by political failure and angst about looming environmental catastrophe” (Walsh, 256).

Conclusion

In conclusion, McCarthy's *The Road* is a gruesome macabre story about the future of America as a wasteland. McCarthy recounts the some of the events in a sort of nightmarish dreams to show his awesome future vision of America. McCarthy is not definite in identifying the unknown disaster which has hit the world and caused destruction and environmental pollution everywhere. The theory of ecocriticism is appropriate for studying McCarthy's *The Road* because environment and nature play the major role in the events of the narrative; and because environment and nature affect all characters and control the current of all events and scenes from the very beginning till the end. Ecocriticism sprang from the environmental modern movement of the 1960s which originally came to focus on a few prominent environmental issues and disasters and to identify and criticize the dangerous and damaging effects of human activity on the global environment. Ecocriticism is meant to see further into how the setting affects a novel. It discusses the surroundings and environmental conditions that play a major role in a story. In McCarthy's *The Road* there is a growth of understanding and consciousness toward the biophysical environment. McCarthy focuses on environment and ecology more than humans. The landscape is devastated by fire, ash, isolation, abandoned towns and houses and a long road to travel. All over the scenes of the novel from the very beginning till the end, the terrifying atmosphere dominates the events. *The Road* reflects a dystopian atmosphere.

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