

Apocalyptic and Post-apocalyptic Representations in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

Through the analysis of characters, themes, motifs and symbolic imagery, the current paper attempts to explore the recesses of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) to uncover its apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic treasures. This analysis will depend on the Book of Revelation as a guiding text to highlight the main points of convergence between the novel and The Revelation of St. John the Divine or The Apocalypse – the last book in The Bible. The events of the novel can be interpreted through this prophetic lens. Hope in a post-apocalyptic landscape is represented by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Despite being a time of hopelessness, hope emerges eternally at the end of the novel. Revelation is a message and a warning of the apocalypse. The current study approaches Revelation from a literary perspective. This is why the analysis will include some points under the apocalyptic domain, others under the post-apocalyptic and some under both.

Keywords: Apocalypse, Post-apocalypse, The Book of Revelation, Cormac McCarthy, The Road.

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Introduction

Dealing in analysis with characters, themes, motifs and symbolic imagery, the current paper attempts to explore the recesses of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) to uncover its apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic treasures. This analysis will depend on the Book of Revelation as a guiding text to highlight the main points of convergence between the novel and The Revelation of St. John the Divine or The Apocalypse. The events of the novel can be interpreted through this prophetic lens. Hope in a post-apocalyptic landscape is represented by McCarthy's *The Road*. Despite being a time of hopelessness, hope emerges eternally at the end of the novel. Revelation is a message and a warning of the apocalypse. The current study approaches Revelation from a literary perspective.

The comparison and contrast between apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic representations in *The Road* help to highlight reading of both the Book of Revelation and *The Road*. The paper tackles what probably happens in the pre-apocalyptic world culminating in the apocalypse and the violent incidents in the post-apocalyptic era. *The Road* is categorized under the genre of post-apocalyptic literature. Also, it belongs to the general genre of apocalyptic literature. This is why the analysis will include some points under the apocalyptic domain, others under the post-apocalyptic and some under both. The elements of the apocalyptic thought include numerology, the Whore of Babylon, and Gog and Magog. Post-apocalyptic components comprise atheism, lack of identity and meaning, suicide, cannibalism, the post-apocalyptic heaven, earth and sea, death and darkness everywhere, and aimlessness

and disillusionment. Both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic terrains encompass the Messiah figure, the Antichrist, the war between goodness and evil or Armageddon, a note of hope or despair, the demise of civilization, fire, angry nature, a global holocaust and prophecy as represented by Ely.

Published in 2006, *The Road* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2007. In this very year, McCarthy (1933-2023) was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey on television, and *The Road* was adapted for film in 2009 (Walsh 278). *The Road* has both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic biblical representations. The impact of the Book of Revelation on *The Road* cannot be ignored and can be traced throughout the novel. Biblical images of the end of the world are scattered in the narrative that is imbued with grimness and horror. *The Road* mainly discusses theological and ecological motifs (Peebles 116). The father-son relation is the ultimate core of the novel without diminishing the other relations with God and environment (Peebles 129).

What McCarthy states clearly is the value of suffering in *The Road* that is reminiscent of the suffering of the faithful in Revelation. McCarthy's prophetic vision of the apocalypse is similar to that of John of Patmos. In *The Road*, McCarthy contends that the destruction done cannot be undone. This is why McCarthy is furious at the whole heritage of civilization since all the accumulation of knowledge throughout human history does not prevent humanity from mass self-destruction. This entire human edifice does not avail mankind and eventually results in nothingness (McCarthy 96).

Philip Snyder confirms that McCarthy's moral code is remaining kind in an unkind society or sticking to humanity in a brutal world (Hillier 270). McCarthy warns people of the end of the world the same way John of Patmos did: "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand" (*The Bible*, Rev. 1.3). Asked by Oprah Winfrey about the apocalyptic thread in *The Road*, McCarthy explains that while he and his eight-year old son John were staying in a hotel in America, he looked outside the window and imagined the future of the town after several decades. He envisages the city as burnt up. His son inspired him to write about his fearful apocalyptic dream (Lincoln 163-64).

In Ashley Kunsa's "'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," there is a contrast between two vantage points by critics: Vereen M. Bell argues that McCarthy is a nihilist, while Edwin T. Arnold contends that in the novel there is always hope (58). On one side, Shelly L. Rambo states that in this post-apocalyptic world, death is the most probable end result (99). On the other side, the boy cannot be only claimed a Messiah-figure, but also a new Adam who will inaugurate a new life on earth (Kunsa 65).

Theoretical Framework

In the Jewish and Christian heritage, the Apocalypse which means prophecy of the end of the world refers mainly to the Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, written by the apostle

John of Patmos. The origin of the word “revelation” is the Greek word “*apokalupsis*” (Burns 68). The word “apocalypse” is derived from the Greek verb *apokalyptein* that denotes writings that uncover the Ultimate Truths (Cook 20). McCarthy can be considered a visionary who reveals to the contemporary world the possible horrible end of humankind on earth. The Greek word “*apokalupsis*” may be traced back to the last decade of the first century CE, the period during the rule of Domitian (ca. 95-96 CE) (McAllister, "Through" 8). The Book of Revelation has greatly influenced almost every sector of the Judeo-Christian life since its appearance in the first century AD and up till today. It does not only predict the future of humanity, but it also gives an outline and order to a world overwhelmed with anarchy (McAllister, "Through" 2).

Today, predictions are not restricted to a prophet revealing his prophecy to his nation; everyone who has access to the Internet can be a prophet divulging his prognosis to the rest of the world (DiTommaso, "Contemporary World" 336). Lorenzo DiTommaso states: “The prophet today has six billion faces, *and that prophet is us*” ("Contemporary World" 336; italics original). This statement echoes Ely's argument in *The Road*: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 143).

The Book of Revelation focuses on the imminent end of history (Collins, "Apocalypticism" 32). It reveals “things which must shortly come to pass” (Rev. 1.1). In the modern age, apocalypticism has become more significant and popular, especially with John Nelson Darby's Premillennial Dispensationalism in the nineteenth century

(Collins, "Apocalypticism" 32-33). This movement utilizes symbols in Revelation to interpret and expect future political situations. This trend is substantiated in Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Likewise, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins published the contemporary work *Left Behind* series which shows signs of fundamentalism. This is why apocalypticism has acquired a tint of notoriety in the current times, especially among academicians (Collins, "Apocalypticism" 33). LaHaye and Jenkins envisage the apocalypse as occurring in the U.S. in the 20th century (Matter 120).

The main conception discussed by priest Darby is the Rapture which means the first return of Christ to take his followers to the sky, leaving other people in a period of affliction and then the second return in which he will conquer the Antichrist and start a period of one thousand years of prosperity and peace (Frykholm 442). *The Road* can be construed within the context of the first return when believers are killed by the atomic explosion and are taken to heaven; then the remaining people are left in suffering on earth till the second return when Jesus will defeat the Antichrist.

Paul Hanson differentiates between apocalypse, apocalypticism and apocalyptic eschatology: apocalypse is a literary genre; apocalypticism is a social ideology; apocalyptic eschatology is a number of themes (Collins, "What" 2). As a literary genre, John Collins defines "apocalypse" as:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a

human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world. ("Towards" 9)

Interest in the apocalypse is usually incited by a deep feeling that wickedness has predominated the world and has to come to an end (Goff 53). The story of Revelation reveals that a holy fighter conquers a tremendous beast, in the form of a dragon/Satan inviting people for evil deeds (Friesen 170). This story can be identified in *The Road* where the father and his son fight the forces of evil or cannibalism since the man and boy are the remaining sacred warriors or carriers of fire.

Two patterns of apocalypticism should be differentiated: biblical and secular. The former attributes the apocalypse to divine intervention to end the world as believed in all Abrahamic religions. The latter ascribes the apocalypse to "superhuman" development that brings about the anticipated closure of the world like nuclear annihilation (DiTommaso, "Popular Culture" 479). Most apocalyptic novels follow the last pattern in spite of the existence of some sporadic biblical hints which clarify the significance of these biblical images even in the secular pattern of apocalyptic fiction (479-80). One of the peculiar features of the secular mode of the worldview is what can be dubbed "post-apocalyptic" (493).

The term "post-apocalyptic" is an oxymoron because there is actually nothing after the apocalyptic; it is the end for everything

according to Revelation. There is nothingness after the apocalypse and not any kind of life. There are not events after the battle of Armageddon, the salvation and the judgment (DiTommaso, "Popular Culture" 496). Post-apocalypticism is in harmony with the secular mode of the worldview in terms of the modern changes in human abilities to practice what was previously considered only divine such as the ability to fly and perfecting sciences like genetic engineering. These newly acquired powers are not without price. Humanity that has achieved this scientific success has developed new ways of its own destruction like germ wars, ecological catastrophes and nuclear annihilation. Thus, post-apocalypticism suggests new societies that can be called utopian or dystopian after the destruction of the world (496-97).

The origin of apocalypticism in American fiction can be traced back to the Bible (Book of Daniel and Book of Revelation), and the current dangers of nuclear wars, pandemics and environmental collapse (Estes 191). Until about 1950, the meaning of the apocalypse depended on the Bible, but after 2000, the word "apocalypse" has tended to allude to the destruction of the world without much religious backdrop (191-92). In the 21st century, the word "apocalypse" extends to so many fields that its meanings can become unlimited (192). The contemporary popularity of the apocalyptic genre in the US can be read in terms of the current revival of Christian radicalism and the new awareness of ecological issues. This awareness coincides with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in WWII with its concomitant prospect of the extinction of mankind in a potential nuclear war (194).

The principal characters of the novel are anonymous. They are referred to as "the man" and "the boy." This is not without reason. Most probably McCarthy purposefully does this to make his characters universal to represent any future human beings. In other words, anyone of us can be the father or the son. Though the events of the novel occur in the US, they can as well occur in any place on the planet (Greenwood 78).

The universal message of McCarthy is conveyed in *The Road*: humankind as a whole is surrounded by a sense of nihilism that reaches its extreme of utter despair in the apocalypse which is the momentous sign of self-destruction (Monk 36). After the cataclysm, except for a few human beings, most of all other animals have become extinct including horses, wolves, dogs, cows, birds and fish. They all almost have become history. Man himself is threatened to reach a similar fate (127-28). Human existence on earth is under the threat of extinction when no more food or drink is available and when the remaining people fall in the clasp of cannibals. In this world, it seems that God is no longer interested in humanity (147).

Apocalyptic Representations

In terms of numerology, an apocalyptic representation rather than post-apocalyptic is crystallized in the time 1:17 at which the global disaster occurs. Some ardent supporters of McCarthy clarify a relationship between the time of the apocalypse at 1:17 at which the time stops and Genesis 1.17 in which God enlightens the universe with the sun and stars. McCarthy presents the apocalypse in a reversed way

as the time at which the sun becomes blackened and thus putting an end to this world (Hage 143). McCarthy writes: "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (28). The current study argues another biblical relationship between the time 1:17 and Revelation 1.17 in which Jesus asks John of Patmos not to be afraid as He is the first and the last. This is a reference to the beginning of this world and its closure with the apocalypse.

The time of the catastrophe 1:17 is quite allegorical since it can be read in the light of Revelation 1.17. Verses 1.16-17 of Revelation are very relevant: "And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last." The sun-like light of Christ's face is analogous to the long shear of light that accompanies the catastrophe and is closely linked to the "two-edged sword." The "two-edged sword" may hint at both human and natural causes of the apocalypse. The stars may be construed as the ones the man and the boy have a glimpse of in their journey through a dusk and ashen planet, shining in darkness as rays of hope (Frye, *Understanding* 169). "I am the first and the last" concludes the verse to suggest that the world begins and ends with Jesus's Word. In verse 1.19 of Revelation, Jesus says: "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, . . . and the things which shall be hereafter." This pinpoints that the novel as a biblical allegory is a herald or an admonition for people anticipating the end of the world. It is the impact of the written Word on all humankind; it reveals a

message of both darkness and light to humanity (Frye, *Understanding* 169).

A distinctive characteristic of Revelation is its extensive use of numerology. For instance, the number “seven” has symbolic significance in Revelation. In the old times, it indicates “completeness” as there are “seven days in the week, seven seas, and seven known planets” (Paul 46). The cataclysm in *The Road* occurs at 1:17 which ends with the number 7 too, in an indication that this is the finale or completeness of the world. In addition, 666 is harnessed to indicate the beast since number 6 is a symbol of exceptional power like cannibals who stand for the beast in the novel. Accordingly, Revelation goes beyond the explicit denotations of words and implicit meanings of its embedded metaphors to occult messages conveyed through its well-measured numerology (47).

Jay Ellis contends that the word "scared" is mentioned 17 times in the boy's speech (Walsh 281). The number 17 is significant here for McCarthy states that the apocalypse occurs at the time 1:17. In Revelation 1.17, Jesus asks John of Patmos not to fear. The words "fear" and "scare" are similar in meaning. It is a Christian clarion call not to be afraid; it is a reassuring message.

The "great whore" or the harlot of Babylon or the impious city can be interpreted as the entire perverse world (Rev. 17.1). The "plague" can be read as the outbreak of a virus like COVID 19 (Rev. 16.21). The good church is likened to "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve

stars:" (Rev. 12.1). Also, there is the image of the persecution of the woman by the dragon (Rev. 12.13). The dragon may be a symbol of China (Gog and Magog) that wages war against the US. The US (Capitalism) and China (Communism) will probably destroy each other and the whole world using nuclear weapons. This will precipitate the cataclysm leading to the post-apocalyptic era. "[T]he temple of the tabernacle" can be construed as the boy himself or the land of rescue or what can generally be called Jerusalem (harbor of safety) (Rev. 15.5). The appearance of the cannibals or the Antichrist or the devil is followed by the Second Coming of the Messiah figure or the boy. In the wake of this Parousia is the Day of Judgment.

The qualities of the Whore of Babylon include ambivalent nature: she is strong, rich and sexy and this is why she is coveted, but at the same time she drinks the blood of saints and this is why she is frightening: "And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration" (Rev. 17.6). Hence, this can be a direct reference to cannibals who enjoy eating human flesh and who symbolize evil in *The Road*. She is also described as a slave trader (Runions 246). This is similar to cannibals in *The Road* who enslave people and humiliate them. This tendency of cannibals may seem attractive at a time of starvation, but at the same time it is repulsive. As the Whore is seductive, so is colonial power that necessitates bloodshed and genocide (Runions 247).

At the end of the world, people will look as if they were drunk (McCarthy 97). People at that time are "lost men" or left behind. The

man in *The Road* believes that the remaining people on earth are the evil left behind (127). The earth will witness changes in the position of the sun and hemispheres. There are also phantoms and resurrection of the dead (98). In the morning, the sunrise comes from the west which is a sign of the apocalypse (121). Another sign is the shortness of the day (131). The weather is terrible: thunder, lightning, rain and coldness (105). The loss of the world is epitomized by ash everywhere.

Post-apocalyptic Representations

The events of the novel arouse many atheistic inquiries about the meaning of life and the goodness and fairness of the Deity. According to these inquiries, the meanings of life and joy do not reside in metaphysics, but in the close relationships between human beings and from which some feeling of security can be derived. The setting of the novel is a desolate planet that reflects a bottomless hole or a Sisyphean task that is fruitless, and where the reign of despair dominates the scene except for some moments of merriness that can be found in close human relations (Frye, *Understanding* 173).

Though the mother's beliefs are not mentioned in the novel, the only stable truth about her is her hopelessness and desire to leave the post-apocalyptic world to a world of "nothingness" (McCarthy 49). The man oscillates between belief that God is nonexistent and fury against an existent God who throws people into the clasp of misery (Frye, *Understanding* 175). The man gives vent to his wrath: "Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul?"

Oh God, he whispered. Oh God” (McCarthy 10). Despite showing no lucid viewpoint about belief in God in the novel, it is implied that faith is an antidote to despair as expressed in the man's belief in his son's holiness and in his son's belief in God's benevolence (Frye, *Understanding* 175).

James Wood asserts that McCarthy is preoccupied with theodicy - providence and struggle between goodness and evil - in *The Road* (Phillips 179). McCarthy's viewpoint of religion is ambiguous. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2007, McCarthy expresses an ambivalent view about faith which goes hand in hand with his writing in *The Road* of atheistic believers (Phillips 179-80). This ambivalence is clear-cut in what Ely says: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 143). Ely can be read as a reference to the prophet Elijah who expects the end of the world. He says: "I knew this was coming" (McCarthy 142).

Although the writer John Clute argues that the main issue in *The Road* is God, he cannot see anything beyond the road, in other words, he sees the road as an impasse without any salvation at the hands of a Christ at the end (Josephs 133). Skepticism about the existence of God permeates the whole text and forms one of its chief motifs (Josephs 134). Various sporadic passages in the novel clearly state the absence of God in the world of the left behind or disbelievers: "Barren, silent, godless" (McCarthy 4). Further, McCarthy says, "The crushing black vacuum of the universe" (110). The potentiality that the cataclysm is not caused by a nuclear explosion but by some other force casts serious

doubts upon the existence of God who, if he is there, could have prevented such a catastrophe (Josephs 135).

A feeling of unsureness about identity permeates the characters in the novel. When the man is asked by the boy about the identity of the lightning-stricken man, he asserts that he does not know. When the man is asked by a "roadrat" whether he is a doctor, he negates giving any certain truth about himself. When Ely asks the man and the boy a similar question, they do not tell him any specific answer. When Ely is asked by the man whether his real name is Ely, he does not confirm this. This lack of any particular identity in the novel reinforces the overall feeling of loss that wraps the post-apocalyptic identity (Gwinner 142).

Like the material death in the post-apocalyptic world, signifiers have become dead, losing their signifieds (Gwinner 143). Names of almost everything in the pre-apocalyptic world fall and disappear from existence exactly like leaves that wither and fall from trees in the autumn of the post-apocalyptic world. Words fall in the abyss of forgetfulness. McCarthy illuminates: "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" (75). This affirms the meaninglessness of almost everything in this new life and desacralization at the end of days (McCarthy 75). The extermination of the world coincides with the effacement of meaning. The disappearance of meaning coheres with the negation of sacred truth and the principle of goodness (Gwinner 143).

Established human systems such as language, timing and mapping have lost their significance. Signifiers no longer have signifieds since traditional meanings no longer exist for familiar objects. Time has lost its value since the father has no calendar. Maps no longer refer to real places after the destruction of the states (Walsh 267-68). As far as the maps in the novel are concerned, John Cant states that they are void of any real significance since they do not refer to real objects or places in this devastated world (Walsh 277). The father and his son are homeless in a world that has no traces from the past except for a heap of unclear memories (Walsh 268). The father tries to use stars to find out directions, but he fails because the sky is dim as a result of the air laden with ash (McCarthy 87).

The post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* seems to be void of ethics (Hillier 263). One of the excruciating images in this post-apocalyptic world is the one of the library where books are burnt and thrown into pools of water (McCarthy 157-58). This image highlights to what extent human knowledge fails to save humanity from this bleak future. The words in these books no longer indicate any meanings since the objects they refer to no longer exist. This knowledge is mirage that cannot be benefited from; it cannot stop the destruction of the world at the hands of humans (Hillier 265). Dana Phillips explains how the father is disappointed about the value of books in preventing the world from reaching this catastrophic end. *The Road* itself is no exception; it cannot hinder the world from reaching its fateful conclusion (Phillips 175). In the post-apocalyptic world, language has no value since words no longer refer to anything in the real world (Woodson 22-23). Old

concepts like luck have become empty and meaningless (McCarthy 146).

The Road features a suicidal response to a hostile, futile and Godless world. The two possible options for the father and his son are to stay alive or commit suicide using the pistol in case they are caught by the cannibals to avoid horrific death. Suicide is better than humiliation at the hands of the "bad guys". The pistol is a symbol of the destruction of humanity by such kind of weapons and a symbol of the potential end of all remaining people on the planet (Matiu 100). The mother who suicides sees the father and son's survival as riskier than protective for the boy. Therefore, perhaps the mother's view seems more logical than the father's (Walsh 264). She elaborates:

I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it ... You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take ... As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart. (McCarthy 48-49)

An issue discussed by Susan Tyburski is the option of suicide and how the boy's attachment to other people gives him support and hope that probably save him from suicide (Walsh 291).

The man is so desperate that he wonders if he can kill his son in this dire situation out of mercy to save him from cannibals. The man says to his son, "Curse God and die" (McCarthy 96). This statement can be juxtaposed with the advice of Job's wife to her husband who almost

loses everything that can keep a human living: "Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die" (Job 2.9). Further, the man's wife is similar to Job's wife in their adoption of utter despondency and suicide as a response to the entirely unbearable circumstances around them (Hillier 267). Like Job, the man never loses his hope and stamina in front of all the challenges he confronts. As Job gets his inspiration from his faith in God, the man pursues spiritual support in the goodness of the cultural and moral heritage he had before the apocalypse (Hillier 267-68).

The father has an ambivalent attitude towards his son: he loves him heartily, but he sometimes thinks he can kill him in order to protect him from a horrible fate at the hands of cannibals (Walsh 258). The boy sees this fate incarnated in the terrible scene of the burnt baby who lost his head and bowels (McCarthy 167). This image could have been predicted by the mother who suicides out of despondency about the present and future. She states: "We're the walking dead in a horror film" (McCarthy 47). This statement later proves to be completely sound as seen in the behavior of the cannibals. One of the most memorable scenes in this connection is the dried head of a human being under a cakebell (McCarthy 155). Another unforgettable scene is the one of the cellar full of nude people ready to be dismembered and eaten, and one of them is already mutilated and the remaining of his legs burnt. The cellar is fraught with terrible odor (McCarthy 93). The marching army of the bad guys is a scene of terror to the boy and his father (McCarthy 77-78). It features the vanity of the world.

The post post-modern violence in *The Road* is rendered so primitive in the form of cannibalism. This can be considered regression to inhuman acts of a radically uncivilized society. Michael Chabon illustrates that one of the main aspects of the relation between the father and his son is the father's dread that he will die and leave his son to face such terrible circumstances around him. As an outlet of this dilemma, the father ruminates killing his son to save him from a worse fate (Peebles 123-24). God inflicts pain and suffering upon evildoers: "I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one of the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them" (Jer. 19.9). Perhaps, when McCarthy wrote this novel, he had this verse in mind because it meticulously describes cannibalism in *The Road*. Indeed, eating human flesh is a post-apocalyptic hallmark.

The whole post-apocalyptic heaven, earth and sea seem utterly different from the pre-apocalyptic ones: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Rev. 21.1). This realization of the apocalyptic prediction is depicted in the novel. It is feasible to use this verse to describe the environment in *The Road*: the heaven has become dark, the earth has become a devastated freezing planet and the sea has become a mass grave for fish and seabirds. What remains for the dwellers of the earth is tribulation: "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea!" (Rev.12.12). It is a time of persecution for which the best remedy is patience. The man and his son have no other choice but perseverance.

The father tells his son that the good should "keep trying" and "dont give up" as they themselves do, and in return they are compensated for their goodness (McCarthy 116). The long suffering of the father and his son on the road is actually martyrdom.

The recurrent lightning and thunder in the novel echo the following verse in the Book of Revelation: "And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices:" (Rev. 4.5). They are signs of heavenly power to impress the good and terrorize the evil. They arouse feelings of awe in both the former and the latter.

McCarthy suggests: "The wind had blown the ash from the ice and the ice was black and the creek looked like a path of basalt winding through the woods" (30). This is a stark image of dark or black ice, in other words, darkness. Basalt is a dark, fine-grained volcanic rock which, by the same token, reflects darkness. Everything is dark including the creek, the road, the woods, the trees, human bodies and even water. In the absence of the sun rays, it is getting not only darker but colder day after day. There is an excessive repetition of gloomy words like "dead," "charred," "black," "scared," "sullen," "gray," "bleak," "dark," "ash" and "darkness" throughout the novel. The repetition of the words "silence," "snow," "cold" and "coldness" indicate death everywhere, especially dead vegetation such as dead grass, dead vine, dead leaves and dead branches.

McCarthy notes, "Beyond the window just the gathering cold, the fires on the horizon" (50). There is always this contrast between coldness and fires. Further, the words "dirt" and "dirty" are reiterated

several times to emphasize the dirtiness of this fallen world. McCarthy proposes, "Smell of mold and excrement" (91). These images show dirtiness at the time of the post-apocalypse. Also, the repetition of words like "murk," "haze" and "mist" is relevant here, for it adds to the atmosphere of mystery in the post-apocalyptic world. The scattered blood, bones, skin and guts in addition to the mutilated corpses all exhibit the brutality of post-apocalyptic times. Even the countryside which stands for the beauty of landscape has become dead (75).

The reason why the man is intent on reaching the coast is ambiguous. He wishes he could find warmth and light at the coast; however, this is surely uncertain (McCarthy 180). When they reach the beach, they are disillusioned by what they see. It is like all the lands they pass through; it is gray and ruined. It is not blue, but it is a black ocean. It is "Cold. Desolate. Birdless" (182). The shore has become a mass grave of fish and seabirds (187). This is an expression of the futility of life and perhaps the anger of nature. Everything in life turns to be a lie except the truth that death is imminent (200).

Both Apocalyptic and Post-apocalyptic Representations

William Kennedy reckons that the boy is a messianic figure as proved by the words of his father. From the very beginning of the novel, the father believes that his son is a manifestation of God or the embodiment of the "Word of God:" "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 4). The father sanctifies his son, claiming that he is the only impetus for the father to remain alive (Gwinner 139). The boy is the

reason that prevents the man from committing suicide (McCarthy 4). Moreover, his golden hair looks like that of Jesus (McCarthy 64). This image of the boy is reinforced by the excruciating journey of the father and his son on the road (Hage 52). It may be compared with the journey of the Holy Family. However, he is a Messiah in a world without faith, without morality or even the least traces of civilization. All of these have vanished with the apocalypse (Hage 52). The boy's involvement in a good family at the end of the novel may be read as renewal of life on earth. Thus, it is a fresh beginning for the living dead who will survive the cataclysmic end.

Two significant biblical implications in the novel are the boy as a messiah and the journey of the boy and his father on the road which can be read as a pilgrimage (Frye, *Understanding* 167). The features of the boy as a messiah include his serenity and altruism (Frye, *Understanding* 168). The boy's very innocent and meek nature endows him with messianic features as confirmed by his father's statement in which he sees his son as a holy grail: "Golden chalice, good to house a god" (McCarthy 64). Although the prospect of the boy seems hazy after the death of his father, the figure of his father remains the most salient in his current situation. The significance of his father's influence continues even after passing away. This can be interpreted spiritually in terms of Christianity as the Father figure (Gwinner 154).

The association between the boy and Jesus or God is frequently alluded to throughout the novel. Cleaning his son's hair from blood scattered from the head of the bad guy that the father killed, the man compares this act of cleaning to anointing which is considered a kind of

liturgy. McCarthy writes: "All of this like some ancient anointing" (63). The allusion here is to the name Messiah which means the anointed person (Josephs 137). Besides, the father says: "[W]hen he moved the light moved with him" in reference to his son (McCarthy 233). This alludes to Shekinah which is the manifestation of the presence of God in Judaism. The man tells his son stories from the vanished world to urge him to maintain the principles of stamina and valor (Hillier 268). The boy does not show interest in hearing his father's stories about goodness, courage and justice because he believes that they do not express truth. In these stories, the haves help the have-nots; nevertheless, in reality this does not happen (McCarthy 225). These stories are happy ones; they do not display the horror of real life (McCarthy 226).

The boy states: "I am the one" (McCarthy 218). He means that he is the one who has to care about other people, which is reminiscent of many similar announcements in the Holy Bible. For instance, Jesus says, "I am the alpha and the omega" (Rev. 1.8). The boy's inner feeling that he should help the needy is derived not from the Scriptures or sermons at the church, for these sources of inspiration are no longer available in the post-apocalyptic world; rather he gets such ideas from the stories told by his father about goodness, courage and justice (Josephs 138).

Related to the fire symbol is the light symbol that accompanies the boy wherever he goes and heralds what the man thinks of his son to stand for as Parousia (Josephs 138). Two of the names of Jesus are Light and Sun which can easily be associated with the "fire" that the

father and his son symbolically carry. In the first drafts of the novel, McCarthy included another title for the novel. It is "The Grail" with all its biblical connotations. He also included the expression "blessed child" to describe the boy. All these allusions confirm the Messiah figure of the boy (Josephs 139).

Another word that is used by McCarthy to portray the light of the boy is "tabernacle." McCarthy says, "glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (230). In the Holy Bible, tabernacle is the locus of worshipping or the locus of Jesus that the boy incarnates (Josephs 139). This movable temple can be associated with the one illuminated in the Book of Revelation: "And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein" (Rev. 11.1). Like Prometheus who is tortured for transferring fire to humans, the man and his son are tortured beyond imagination for carrying fire or the last traces of humanity (Lincoln 168).

The boy has pity for the old as represented by the old man, for the sinful as embodied by the thief and for the young as epitomized by the other boy. He has mercy on all he meets from the old man, the other boy, the dog to the thief representing the aged, children, animals and the sinful respectively (Hage 143). At the end of the novel, when the good woman tells the boy that "the breath of God was his breath," she implies that he is a Messianic figure (McCarthy 241).

One of the main components of Christian apocalypticism is the Antichrist who has become so popular today through horror movies,

but who is not scrutinized enough through religious analysis currently (Hughes 251). He is portrayed as “man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (II Thess. 2.3). Also, he is described as “a beast rise up out of the sea” (Rev. 13.1). The word “Antichrist” with a capital “A” does not exist in the Bible; however, the words “antichrist” and “antichrists” are mentioned in First John (2.18) to refer to Christ’s enemies to be elaborated on in Rev. 13 (Hughes 251). The conception of the Antichrist is open to innovative literary interpretations (Hughes 252). He can be read in apocalyptic terms as scientific progress and in post-apocalyptic terms as cannibalism. He can also be read as a real person. Amy Frykholm showcases this argument: "The list of potential antichrists grew long and diverse. It included Hitler, Mussolini, Moshe Dayan, Anwar Sadat, King Juan Carlos of Spain, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, John Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein, and Barack Obama" (447).

The basic information about the Antichrist is extracted from the Bible, Second Thessalonians 2.1–12. He emerges at the end of the world that comes unexpectedly. “For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (I Thess. 5.2). This applies to *The Road* in which the apocalypse comes suddenly. The ambiguity of Second Thessalonians 2.1–12 arouses many questions about the nature of the Antichrist with myriad readings. By and large, the Antichrist is an epitome of the conception of inherent evil that exists in every age (Hughes 255). This is conspicuous in the role cannibals play in *The Road* as they commit the most heinous and

primitive crime of eating human flesh even of babies. Thus, the body of cannibalism/Antichrist is set against the body of the church/Christ.

The Antichrist or cannibalism will dominate all over the world and will oppress all churches, that is, all Christians (Hoover 85). The current study claims that he can be interpreted also as scientific progress that does not create troubles for one church but all churches and does not dominate one country but infiltrates to every home in the form of the Internet. This scientific progress leads to the materialism, rationalism and militarism that destroy the world. This one-eyed Antichrist sees only through the eye of materialism because the other eye of spiritualism is missing. Predominance of technology, proliferation of nuclear weapons and artificial intelligence will lead to final extinction of the human race according to environmental apocalypticism or eco-criticism. The dragon is a symbol of evil in Revelation. The dragon of nuclear power is hidden or imprisoned in the earth to be only unleashed in the current age to precipitate the annihilation of humankind. In reference to the atom on earth, it has existed since the creation of the universe to conclude human history with the glow of nuclear explosion. Describing the mushroom as "alien" is reminiscent of the mushroom clouds formed by a nuclear explosion that may be the reason for the destruction of the world in the novel (McCarthy 34).

The appearance of the Antichrist coincides with a period of apostasy in the Christian world. This apostasy is so powerful that the church will fail to resist (Hoover 88). Cannibals in the novel can be associated with the Beast referred to in the Book of Revelation: "Here

is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man: and his number is Six hundred threescore and six" (Rev. 13.18). Since cannibals are the "bad guys," they stand for the Antichrist who also can be identified with the beast in his evil and greed. Number six is repeated three times for emphasis, and number six itself is a number of outstanding power; cannibals have the exceptional power of devouring human flesh; they are real beasts; they are pure evil. People are divided into two partitions: followers of the Lamb represented by the good guys or the father and son, and followers of the Beast represented by the bad guys or cannibals.

The late modern society has been demolished and on its debris a new one has been established; it is a community that is divided between the righteous and the wicked. The battle of Armageddon between the "good guys" or scavengers and the "bad guys" or cannibals is perhaps the final cycle in the conflicts in this world. Cannibalism is the extreme form of violence and brutality against humanity at the end of the world (Greenwood 78). Hence, Armageddon can be read as the Third World War that ends with nuclear devastation of the world or the war between the "good guys," and cannibals in *The Road*.

The end of *The Road* is so ambiguous that it arouses divergent critiques (Peebles 130). The last paragraph of the novel is quite obscure since it concludes the story with a note of hope and despair at the same time. The end of *The Road* is promising for a new beginning after hundred pages of desperate details. The end is undeniably hopeful with the possibility of the boy as a savior (Peebles 132). It is true that the previous world can never come back because it is beyond repair; the

only remaining hope is the boy who outlives his father and still carries the fire of civilization through sticking to ethics that never die. The boy as belonging to the "good guys" returns to the hug of the good family who are also "good guys." Nonetheless, the post-apocalyptic world will not be at all like the old one since nature no longer exists (Hage 144-45). The "deep glens" in the last paragraph of *The Road* refers to existence before man, that is, a world of absolute purity and innocence as well as secrets (McCarthy 241). On the contrary, the conclusion of the novel can be read differently. The post-apocalyptic world is one of despair, alienation, savagery, and futility (Frye, *Understanding* 179).

The novel ends with a note of optimism and hope. The veteran seems to be a good guy, though not completely confirmed. There are many fortuitous indications that the veteran is an alternative to the father and another carrier of fire. He refuses to take the pistol from the boy; he feels sorry for the father's death; he and his family are not cannibals; he gives a dignified farewell to the corpse of the father (Gwinner 153-54). Another note of hope at the end of the novel is that the boy is espoused and hugged by the good guys and not "enslaved or eaten" by cannibals or the bad guys (Gwinner 156). Cant explains a poignant irony in *The Road*: the novel is about the finale of the world while it promises a new beginning. While it depicts utter chaos, it preaches a sense of order to be restored at the end (Walsh 277). On the other hand, some critics like Susan Kollin see little hope at the end of the novel since the relief of the new family may be only ephemeral in a world with economy and ecology beyond any potential reclamation (158). Another critic, Phillips, concludes his article "He Ought Not

Have Done It': McCarthy and Apocalypse," by stating that in *The Road* there is no place for hope or optimism (188).

McCarthy's metaphor of the brook trout is the obituary of the natural world that is killed by man (Greenwood 80). Since brook trout are so sensitive to any negative change in nature, they stand for all the environment that is devastated by the catastrophe that leads to the apocalypse. They are elevated to a holy status, and they have become extinct with all surrounding nature. They arouse memories from the past bounty times when they thrived in their brooks (Josephs 142). The last word in the novel is "mystery," which is quite significant (McCarthy 241). It is true that the boy is saved at the end which demystifies his story, but human existence on earth will remain murky (Peebles 123). Mystically speaking, mystery can be interpreted as the mysterious mutual love that connects the boy and his father; it can also be read as the mysterious love of the boy towards other miserable people. It is this mystery that can keep the world going in spite of the floods of suffering and despondency enveloping human life (Josephs 143).

Ty Hawkins argues that *The Road* is the "most-utopian" novel written by McCarthy for its persistent hope and the morality it preaches in a world void of morals (129). The man tries to protect his son from dangers in a world where perils lurk everywhere. Perhaps out of responsibility towards humanity, the father tries to keep his son safe in order for good human heritage to continue on earth since the Son is the carrier of fire or the core of civilization. As virtuous beings, the man and the boy stand for the Father and Child (129).

In *The Road*, McCarthy introduces a world that witnesses the demise of civilization and lacks the least traces of it whether natural, architectural, moral, artistic, social, economic, political agricultural, industrial or intellectual (Hage 140). In this world, the whole earth is unavoidably and vehemently burnt up because of human hubris and greed like the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah which God uprooted by fire for their evil (Hage 141). McCarthy does not state the exact reason for the apocalypse; however, he implies that it is the corollary of human aggression, depravity and arrogance (Kushner 8).

The fire is a dominant theme in the novel since it is what differentiates between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." In addition, the man tells his son that fire is omnipresent; it is destroying the earth. Corpses are scattered all around in terrible shapes, and there are ruins of a village of which nothing remains (McCarthy 161). The dead trees turn into ash dissipated through the air (165). The woods disappear in the horizon as if they never existed (167). These areas that were bristling once with life have become lifeless (170). In the existence of mass murder and cannibalism, the earth has become like hell or fire (152). All these meanings are reflected by the concept of fire in the novel.

Nature is angry at man in *The Road*. The aspects of this rage are immanent in the novel: the charred trees, seismic tremors, furious coldness, and dead flora and fauna (Estes 201). Technology and consumerism have their demerits turning the post-apocalyptic world into a trash bin. The whole planet is reduced to a large trash bin full of dead plants, dead animals and corpses everywhere (197). Nature is

extremely harmful (201). The richness of the pre-apocalyptic world is reduced to nothingness in the post-apocalyptic world (204).

John of Patmos renders the apocalypse in the following terms: "The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up" (Rev. 8.7). These are exactly the same details of *The Road*. Ice has become black because of ash wrapping it; ice has become red for it is mixed with the blood of the massacred; trees are falling after being charred; all greenness has been destroyed by fire. The novel is about hell on earth where the few remaining people move without purpose to nowhere. Ignoring the signs that herald the end of the world only precipitates this end. Such signs include political greed and related colonial wars, terrorism, global warming, and pandemics (Lincoln 163). This poses the issue of natural disasters and environmentalism in the light of current concerns about climate change and global warming.

There are unclear reasons for the global cataclysm. Perhaps it is the result of a nuclear holocaust created by a nuclear war causing an eternal nuclear winter. It may also be created by some natural disaster. McCarthy never specifies the reason for this mass destruction (Greenwood 94). The features of this post-apocalyptic world can be seen in the blackening of the sun, the cut of electricity, the stop of all kinds of transportation, the lack of fuel, the absence of all commercial activities, the extermination of all greenness that turned to a heap of ash and the prevalence of chaos everywhere (77).

Darkness is ubiquitous as if the characters are suffering from glaucoma because ash and debris infiltrate the air around them (McCarthy 3). Images of distorted characters are prevalent throughout the novel, such as the man who lost his eye, which alludes to the theme of blindness (Walsh 261). Besides, images of death are no less significant as reflected in the phrase "tableau of the slain" (McCarthy 77).

The old man Ely who states that there is no God may stand for Satan who seduces Jesus in his journey through the waste land (Frye, *Understanding* 175-76). Like the woman, Ely looks forward to death and invites the man to join him in this despair (Frye, *Understanding* 175). The prophetic figure Ely states that "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 143). Christopher Walsh conceives of this statement a "nihilistic" one (260). Further, Ely prophesies that "Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see" (McCarthy 145). This prophecy is verified to be untrue since the boy is saved at the end of the novel and is expected to continue carrying the fire of enlightenment along with the good guys. Ely's prophecy is challenged by the boy (Walsh 260). Therefore, Ely is a fake prophet.

One of the most problematic passages in the novel is Ely's statement: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 143). This is reminiscent of the modern prophet of extremity, Friedrich Nietzsche and his pronouncement about the death of God, which is a clear crystal atheistic or nihilistic expression (Josephs 136). Ely maintains that the boy himself may be a god: "What if I said that he's a god?" (McCarthy 145). The contradiction is clear: how can Ely deny

the existence of God and claim that the boy is a god? The possible answer here is clarified by McCarthy's skepticism or self-contradiction about deity.

Conclusion

In brief, *The Road* is a serious attempt to urge people to rectify their attitudes towards their fellow human beings and the environment. It kindles a torch of light to humanity to move through a darkling road or tunnel to reach the harbor of safety at the end. The final message of the story is uttered by Janet Maslin in her observation that humans should harness hope against an entire world of hopelessness, in other words, a drop of hope against an ocean of despair (Josephs 143). Hence, against all odds the boy survives.

Human journey on earth is similar to the man and his son's journey on the road. The obstacles and horrors that humans face are comparable to the ones experienced by the man and his son but in different civil forms. All these pains lead to a final atrocious death or, sometimes, suicide that expresses utter despair from living in such an excruciating world. For instance, suffering from despair, abandonment, starvation, diseases, cannibalism or threat of being murdered, and alienation are all pains that the man and his son confront and correspondingly all people on earth are liable to face. The man's feeling in the following meditation gives a summary of the novel's theme: "[H]e very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again" (McCarthy 114). Yet, hope persists.

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تمثيلات نهاية العالم و ما بعد نهاية العالم في رواية الطريق لكورماك مكارثي

ملخص

تحاول الدراسة الراهنة الغوص بعمق في خبايا رواية الطريق لكورماك مكارثي للكشف عن كنوز تمثيلات نهاية العالم و ما بعد نهاية العالم و ذلك من خلال تحليل الشخصيات و الأفكار و الصور الرمزية في الرواية. و يعتمد هذا التحليل على سفر الرؤيا كنص هاد لتسليط الضوء على النقاط الرئيسية للالتقاء بين الرواية و سفر الرؤيا. حيث أن أحداث الرواية يمكن تفسيرها من خلال هذه العدسة النبئية. رواية الطريق تمثل الأمل كما يصوره كورماك مكارثي في دنيا ما بعد نهاية العالم. فعلى الرغم من كونه زمان يائس الا ان الأمل ينبع فيه على نحو سرمدى في نهاية الرواية. و سفر الرؤيا ما هو الا رسالة تحذيرية من نهاية العالم. لذا تتناول الدراسة سفر الرؤيا من وجهة نظر أدبية. و من هذا المنطلق يشمل هذا التحليل بعض النقاط التي تعكس نهاية العالم و اخرى تصور ما بعد نهاية العالم و اخيرا بعض النقاط التي تجمع كل من نهاية العالم و ما بعد نهاية العالم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نهاية العالم ، ما بعد نهاية العالم، سفر الرؤيا ، كورماك مكارثي، رواية

الطريق