

Existentialism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Pooja Singal

Asst Prof of English Smt A A A Govt P G College, Kalka, Haryana Contact no: 9896465611
Email id: singalpooja75@gmail.com

The post-apocalyptic genre, sometimes uses the comic frame to make the point clear, like the warning of the dangers of a nuclear holocaust as in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by William Miller, (1960) or environmental catastrophe as in *Earthworks* by Brian Aldiss, (1965) or genetic experimentation as in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Specifying the cause of the disaster, and making it preventable by human effort, brings the comic frame of the post-apocalyptic novels into position. But if the purpose of the tragic apocalypse is to bring the readers into proper relation to the approaching end, the question is: what happens after the end? What about the identity and purpose of the characters? If we project ourselves beyond the end in the tragic frame, we find only void. Tragic post-apocalyptic narratives seem predisposed to raise the question of whether there is any meaning to individual life or human history. These questions are hidden within the genre, but the historical context also provides another force shaping the development of post-apocalyptic fiction.

The Road is a seminal novel within the genre, and Cormac McCarthy is a major novelist exploring and refining the existential ideas that emerge from the tragic frame. Steven Frye says in relation to McCarthy's novels:

For McCarthy, the frontier romance in all its historical scope is simply, or not so simply, a means to explore the human potential for violence, avarice, blindness, self-gratification, and depravity. McCarthy infuses the genre with a philosophical content, using what begins as a popular form to enrich his characters both psychologically and ethically. The reason for placing the novel in the tragic frame is that there is no explanation of the disaster that ruined the civilization. The only direct references are

“The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (45).

Beyond that, there is the evidence of the world suffering from what appears to be a nuclear winter. Yet the devastation could



equally have been caused by a meteor or a chain of massive volcanic eruptions, or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important, as far as the plot of the novel is concerned. In the beginning itself, McCarthy makes it clear that this world is dominated by darkness, relieved only by an ashen daylight, “like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3). This is the first departure from our regular environment and one of the first we see affecting the man and the boy’s behavior. They come to a gas station and examine the pumps only to find them empty, ignoring “a metal barrel full of trash” (6). Instead they notice things that are not useful any more - a cash register, a telephone, and some old automotive manuals. While coming down the road the man comes to his senses and turns back to raid the trash for quart plastic oil bottles: “They sat in the floor decanting them of their dregs one by one, leaving the bottles to stand upside down draining into a pan until at the end they had almost a half quart of motor oil” (6). The painstaking, dull labor required for such little reward indicates their desperate need for fuel for their “little slut lamp” (7).

The Road is not only science fiction but also a horror story. But the thing that stands out is its existentialism. Even in the most miserable circumstances which he can’t control, the man chooses existence, he chooses life for his son, born shortly after the apocalypse. The father chooses to have a project for both of them — to be the “keepers of the fire,” and to be one of the “good guys”— in the face of dread. The man commits his life, his post-apocalyptic existence, to keeping his son alive and safe, at any cost, especially when death seemed quite easier and preferable for both of them. The man believes that if there is a God, and if there is meaning, it is found in his son, and nowhere else. In this post-apocalyptic world, even light is a struggle, something emphasized again in the meticulous, elaborate account of the man crafting a new lamp (115). When the man explains that the purpose of a dam is to make electricity, the boy’s first response is “to make lights” (17), hinting at the boy’s almost pre-modern fascination with electricity, the very production of artificial light, rather than all the other wonders it enables. The contrast between the boy, who was born into this world, and the man, who was born in the pre



catastrophic world, provides much of the novel's fascination. For the man, everything is an ashen grey emptiness, but for the boy this murk is the maximum light he has ever known and his vision has adapted accordingly, and seems clearer than the man's.

What do you see? the boy said.
Nothing.

He handed the binoculars across. The boy slung the strap over his neck and put them to his eyes and adjusted the wheel. Everything about them so still. I see smoke, he said.
Where.

Past those buildings.
What buildings? (66-67)

Another major feature of this world is its barrenness, which McCarthy frequently describes in sentences lacking active verbs, removing any possibility of action or change.

Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung

from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind" (7).

There are barely any signs of growth or life. With nothing left of the natural world except stone and ash, the man and the boy must scavenge what is left of our civilization. It is only the remnants of our world that give this world some sense of individuality and character. The fragments of our culture, absent of any political commentary, create an oddly archaic, elegiac effect. It is tempting to see such elements as the shopping cart as critiques of consumer capitalism, yet there is no persistent evidence that McCarthy intends to critique our culture by showing it in ruins. Instead, these features seem to suggest the futility of all human meanings in the face of death: "Odd things scattered by the side of the road. Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago" (168). The novel's descriptions of now useless objects are integral to the sensation of emptiness. The presence of things underscores the absence of people who could make them meaningful. Hence there are numerous passages which consist largely of lists of objects:

They trucked along the blacktop. Tall clapboard houses. Machinerolled metal roofs. A log barn in a field with an advertisement in ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City (18).

The flat quality of such descriptions fills the novel with a quiet sense of desolation. The apocalypse in *The Road* does not happen with lurid visions of firestorms and panic. Instead it is seen in the isolation of objects from the contexts that gave them meaning. The conditions of the world condemn survivors to scavenge constantly for food. As the man and the boy journey down the road, their biggest fear is not of the cold or the dark or of hunger but of other survivors.

The cold is another major feature of this ruined world. Throughout the novel, the man and the boy must struggle against the incessant chill and the threat of death by exposure. When the novel opens they are heading south because “there’d be no surviving another winter here” (4). Like light, warmth is a hard-won commodity involving arduous labor: “They collected firewood from the north side of the slope

where it was not so wet, pushing over whole trees and dragging them into camp” (30). Hypothermia is a constant threat. As the man warns the boy when he leaves him to find firewood, “Don’t lie down. If you lie down you’ll fall asleep and then if I call you, you won’t answer and I won’t be able to find you” (61). Blankets become so valuable that the man will take them even from corpses, despite the “remnants of rotted hair on the pillow” and the smell of “damp and rot” (68). In *The Road*, the apocalypse is signaled on every page by the crushing absence of those essentials we control today with the flick of a switch but which in this world require either a lot of time to create or the violation of taboo surrounding death.

In this desperate environment, the issue is not simply how to survive but why one would want to survive. This is starkly articulated by the man’s wife, who chooses suicide because there is no reason to live any more:

We used to talk about death, she said. We don’t any more. Why is that?

I don’t know.

It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about. (48)

In the end, despite all the horrors they have experienced, the father makes the leap of faith that the boy's life may yet be worth living, even though nothing of the world depicted makes this believable:

"I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant... you're going to be lucky. I know you are" (235).

In every post-apocalyptic narrative, whatever else remains of our world, humanity always continues to exist. In *The Road*, it is not just that light, warmth, nature, and food have ceased to exist but alongside them humanity is also disappearing, leaving the man with nothing in which to have faith.

The double horror of *The Road* is not simply the end of humanity but the annihilation of the set of moral values we assign to humanity whenever we declare an act "humane" or "inhuman" or commend someone for their "humanity": generosity, love, kindness. The post-apocalyptic genre is commonly peopled with not-quite human creatures, but these can be seen as gestures

towards the disturbing suggestion in *The Road* that the survivors of the apocalypse will no longer be human because what we mean by "human" is a construct of our civilization and once that civilization is gone so too will all the innate morality we like to ascribe to ourselves. Throughout the post-apocalyptic genre we find intimations of such a possibility; in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend*, for example, the protagonist notes that "morality, after all, had fallen with society. He was his own ethic"(50). Yet *The Road* surpasses any other text in exploring the horror of this idea.

One of the novel's most unsettling developments in this regard is our increasing questioning of the man's moral behavior. *The Road's* effect is so intense because McCarthy never lets us forget the conditions in which the man and the boy must survive. He is not interested in what sort of political structures may emerge in the ruins of the world; each page is primarily concerned with how people would stay warm, find food, and avoid a violent death and the pair's exertions to achieve even the most basic comforts emphasize the harshness of the daily struggle. This prompts existential



questions about what human civilization was all for and what a person could make of life in its absence, questions that have always been latent within the post-apocalyptic genre and that McCarthy has explored elsewhere. Finally, *The Road* helps us to see that the variety of mutants, zombies, and fantastic creatures in post-apocalyptic fiction are not simply standard tropes of sci-fi and fantasy but a recognition that what we mean by humanity is a product of our civilization. This idea has been explored before in novels such as *I am Legend*, but McCarthy raises them to a new pitch in *The Road* through the combination of his appalling images of savagery and the beauty of his spartan prose. If the encounters with other humans on the road try to convince us that this bestiality is all that being human really is, then the alchemy of the writing style pushes us to reject such a conclusion and believe that there is more to the bare words, that as long as we have the capacity to tell stories there must be something of humanity still, despite all that has been lost. As the father puts it, in what could be seen almost as a justification for the novel itself: “It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something” (227).

The Road shakes the reader to the core unlike anything else that is readable. There are several ways to consider about and label *The Road*, a story about a father and son who struggle hard to stay alive by traveling southeast to the ocean ten years or so after some unnamed cataclysmic event burned most of the planet, obliterating most life forms and leaving the skies ashen grey. As with the general post-apocalyptic genre, *The Road* is a part of science fiction. The Road can be called the most important environmental book too, because it portrays a world that has totally lost its biosphere, only leaving a handful of humans alive. McCarthy doesn’t sound didactic rather he is very subtle, almost barren and bland, just like the post catastrophe world, that he portrays. McCarthy builds suspense with masterful skill, and makes the reader’s heart pump hard, bringing the novel close to the Gothic horror.

“He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. He could see part of



a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light.”

“Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.

Jesus, he whispered.

Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help , they whispered. Please help us.”

This, probably, is one of the scariest scenes in the novel and probably stands out as one of the most gothic ones in the post apocalyptic genre - humans collecting each other for food in order to survive. These moaning, insipid creatures come into sight from the dark and clatter their chains and reach for the man.

Just as existentialist thought emerged from the horrific events of the twentieth century, McCarthy’s protagonist is forced to

reexamine all that he once knew to be true and good. Cataclysmic events compel epistemic crises. He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the full despair. 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. 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. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.

Works Cited

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. Print
Malik, R S, Jagdish Batra. *A New Approach to Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2014. Print.
Marino, Gordon. *Basic Writings of Existentialism*. New York: Modern, 2004. Print.
