



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

The Road at the End of the World

- Sentimentality and Nihilism in the Journey through the Post-Apocalyptic World of Cormac

McCarthy's Novel *The Road*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse the meaning and implication of the post-apocalyptic future portrayed in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*. Propelling the plot of this novel is a journey on the road that is perpetuated in the post-apocalyptic state of limbo, a state that offers no progression for the characters. A road-narrative in this post-apocalyptic state results in a break with the progressive and change motifs assigned to traditional road narratives and constitute the main elements of the anti-road-novel-structure in *The Road*. By looking at the journey with the novel's bleak surroundings in mind, the study aims to show how several critics out of a sentimental wish for the characters too optimistically tend to extend hope reflected in the relationship between the two main characters, the father and his son, to incorporate a possible future for the boy and humanity. With the results of the analysis on limbo and the road-narrative a comparative analysis is made to other critics' conclusions. The comparative analysis highlights the importance of separating the sentimental reading from a more realistic reading of the post-apocalyptic journey. After doing this, one becomes able to view the novel as a powerful warning on the loss of human goodness and its capability to progress and influence in the world should an apocalypse happen.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, road-narrative, post-apocalyptic, anti-road-novel-structure, limbo, journey, apocalypse, sentimentalism and realism.

Introduction

McCarthy's portrayal of a post-apocalyptic future is a fascinating and ruthless one. *The Road* (2006) is set in a post-apocalyptic, desolate land where the last remnants of humanity fade away into oblivion. In the midst of this misery a journey unfolds, a father and son calling themselves "the good guys" cling to fragments of a lost world and each other while walking the road south in an endless and at times desperate attempt to escape. Embarking on an escapist journey constitutes a continuing thematic feature in the novels of Cormac McCarthy. This is something many critics have observed, Allen Josephs is one of them: "Virtually all of Cormac McCarthy's fragmentary, often picaresque novels are road or trail novels, involving walking, riding, driving, rowing or some combination thereof, and all of his characters are indeed *hombres el camino* [men of the road]" (translation mine, 20). As the title indicates, McCarthy's latest work of fiction *The Road* does not differ from this theme.

In *The Road* the world is dead in terms of nature and morality; a world where cannibalism is a constant threat and civilization is beyond saving. But, to frustrate the interpretation of an absolute end of civilization, the novel infuses hope in the reader through portraying the redeeming love between a father and his son. They are referred to as the "good guys" who will not succumb to immorality on their journey south, whatever happens. By placing hope in form of the good guys and hopelessness in form of a dead surrounding world side by side in the story the novel invites for both sentimental and nihilistic readings.

It is important to realize that the surrounding world needed to aid the father and the boy's escape is gone, but even if the world as we know it has ended and all of nature is dead, the father and his son still continue relentlessly down the road. There is indeed a paradox at the heart of the novel: The world has ended and the hope of a future is no longer a part of the picture, the father knows this and explicitly admits it to the reader, yet he acts as though there was. In other words, the father's actions express hope, which his consciousness does not.

The aim of this essay is to track and explain the father's paradoxical juxtaposition of disbelief and endurance when he continues to move down the road in order to show that it is not a sign of hope for something better, but rather an expression of the inability to accept that the world has ended. The analysis will show that the sentimentally redeeming relationship between the father and the boy is not enough to offer up hope for a future. The essay thus positions itself with the claim that the post-apocalyptic world is indifferent to the values and empathy of the good guys, because analysing the post-apocalyptic world renders any sentimental wishes for the survival of humanity impossible, making a nihilistic interpretation in terms of a future for humanity the only reasonable.

The first chapter will show that the father and his son's journey on the road is enacted in a neglected world, where things have either already faded away, or are fading away into oblivion. This state will be explained as a state of limbo, which is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "an uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution; an intermediate state or condition", and "a state of neglect or oblivion." Directing our attention towards the state of the post-apocalyptic world reveals its inhuman conditions. The reason limbo is relevant for understanding the state of the world in the novel is because it, as a concept, describes a standstill that prevents both regression and progression. This non-progressive environment starkly influences the characters as it causes them to walk without making any progress and does not agree too well with the traditional road novel narrative. As a result, we could argue that *The Road* undermines the common elements of road novels making an anti-road-novel-structure visible. Detecting this structure and its implication on the journey will be the focus of chapter two. In the third and final chapter, which is grounded on the analysis in chapter one and two, it will be argued that in spite of the human goodness and love from a father towards his son, the world is lost and not even the good guys with their moral and love are enough to save it. Understanding the hopelessness of the post-apocalyptic world in which the father and

the boy travels means seeing the novel as a powerful warning of the loss of morality and goodness in humanity that is reflected in the relationship between the two characters. At the end of the novel, the father dies but the boy continues even beyond, however, this is not to be viewed as the first glimpse of a new beginning, as some critics claim. Rather, as the father and the boy's journey must be subordinate to the process of the ending of the world we are instead witnessing a last manifestation of goodness and love that is soon to vanish forever.

Chapter 1: The Post-Apocalyptic World in *The Road*

The clocks stopped at 1:17 (TR 54).

The post-apocalyptic world in *The Road* is a world that lingers in between past and future. The pre-apocalyptic world is lost and a new world has not yet emerged, something Teresa Heffernan sees as significant for the post-modern apocalypse: “The present world is portrayed as exhausted, but there is no better world that replaces it” (Heffernan 5). From early on in the story and all the way through the father contemplates a surrounding world robbed of its meaning: “Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years” (2). The absence of a calendar shows that the characters have no use for time in a world in which time has lost its meaning; the world is no longer in a transitional phase between past and future.

Apart from time, the surroundings in which the father and his son travel are marked with neglect and illustrate a dead and decaying world: “Charred and limbless trunks of trees [...] blackened light poles, [...] a burned house, [...] abandoned roadworks, [...] billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered” (6). The world offers no sign of recovery; there are no means of rebuilding the pre-apocalyptic world: “The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring” (10), “There is no past” (28). What the father describes here is not merely the poetic experience of the wind blowing in a dead world. It is the establishment of a world in limbo, a world of repetitive, non-progressive motion symbolised by the wind: “The soft ash moving in the furrows. Stopping. Moving again” (94). Everything being uncoupled from “its shoring” can be understood as a metaphor for the loss of society and a common social order. This means

that a present from which a past and a future can exist and be formed is absent. According to Lutrull, “the man [...] cares little (at least explicitly) about social progress or constructing new morals. After all, in the post-apocalyptic world, progress, which depends upon a future, is meaningless” (21-22). The imagery of “the bleak and temporal winds” that move “to and fro in the void” along with “the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe” (14) are all symbols of the loss of progress. The non-progressive motion as the common denominator can be said to assert the present state as a state of limbo.

Throughout the novel there are passages, like the ones above, where the father contemplates his surroundings when in full possession of his senses, since it is the only passages in the novel where reason is not altered by survival tactics or other distractions, and from these we can get a true sense of the state of the world. Language and attention to detail in these descriptions of setting gives the feeling that the father cannot ignore the surrounding world and its power over him and his son. The power of the surroundings over the characters is something that Ellis too has observed in the previous novel by McCarthy: “[I]t is in the ‘high passages’ of McCarthy’s style, especially in descriptions of outer weather - of setting – that we may extrapolate from the style some sense of a character’s interiority” (*No Place for Home* 2). It is thus in the “high passages” describing the setting that the father turns inwardly, to reflect and contemplate without being distracted by the need to escape danger on the road and find food in order to survive. However, the father seems motivated enough to ignore the hopelessness in the surrounding world by making it his mission to keep him and the boy alive for as long as possible. Carol Juge comments on the stubbornness in the father’s refusal to give up: “Many times the father thinks that death is upon them, or that there shall be no more than a couple of days left to live, yet he goes on awkwardly, imperfectly, albeit persistently” (24). At times the persistence shown by the father in his relentless struggle to survive while repeating like a mantra that they are “the good guys” blurs the reader’s view of the

impossibility for humanity to survive. Immanuel Kant's pronouncement of 'man' as a rational creature and 'an end in himself' (Heffernan 4) is of relevance for the discussion here, because should the father and his son's struggle for survival and will to keep virtue intact be seen as the means of revelation and salvation. The more realistic interpretation would be to realize that the redemption of the individual in *The Road* never materializes from the sentimental portrayal of the good guys. Instead the loss of a surrounding world of nature and consequently our constructed social world, suggests that man is not "an end in himself".

When the father warns the boy about letting the state of limbo go to his head, he confirms that the external world has a great impact on the internal one: "When your dreams are of some world that never was or some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up" (202). The boy has to accept the present world, he cannot allow himself to dream of a future or the lost past because then the present will become unbearable: "He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death" (17). According to Ellis dreams usually account for some goal or future possibility: "Dreams usually place protagonists out in the open, for instance, and in this mode, they certainly indicate the need for flight in the characters" (*No Place for Home* 5). In previous novels by McCarthy dreams tend to motivate characters, but dreams in *The Road* may offer hope of things that have been and can never be again, thus dreams in the post-apocalyptic limbo threaten to stop the motivation for flight in the father and son and cause them to give up. The scepticism towards dreams is something that Ellis has also observed in previous novels by McCarthy: "Dreams in McCarthy point more to delusions, beliefs and provisional truths, more than to larger truths" (*No Place for Home* 5). In *The Road* these dreams become dangerous for the characters and it is through facing the truth of the present that the father manages to keep death wishes away: "And the dreams so rich in color. How else would death call you? Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain

ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day” (20). Life in the post-apocalyptic world is only bearable if one accepts the present world as the only one, because if the father decides not to face the truth of the blackness and hopelessness of the world, and instead give into dreams the disappointment by contrast would be devastating.

The loss of the pre-apocalyptic concept of change may also be the cause for dreams being dangerous in the post-apocalyptic setting: “In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child’s imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be” (26). “[T]here is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell” (32). The pre-apocalyptic world was inhabited with endless worlds, both physical and psychological, a world of constant change that is essential in order to have belief in ones actions. In *The Road*, the world enables no future in which to project change, not in dreams or in the waking world; the post-apocalyptic world has been reduced to one reality both physically and psychologically in the sense that no matter where they go there is the same constant blackness, grayness and desolation. And to dream of a better place knowing that there is no better place can only be devastating for the spirit. Apart from occasionally finding food and shelter change has almost become entirely obsolete in the limboic void of the present: “In *The Road*, things occasionally get briefly better, and they often get briefly worse, but for the most part they hover around the same dull level of misery and hopelessness.” (Hoberek 490). At the heart of the novel lies the paradoxical state of a world that keeps turning without anything in it making any progress and the father sometimes symbolically contemplates him and his son moving within this paradox: “Their half muted crankings miles above where they circled the earth as *senselessly* (my emphasis) as insects trooping the rim of a bowl” (55). This means that at a deeper level the father realises that their journey is *senseless* and in vain in terms of a future and a new beginning.

When the father and son happen to visit the father’s childhood home, their visit shows

that the idea of a home belongs to the pre-apocalyptic world. The travellers are again dealing with limbo, that is to say, being suspended in between the lost concept of a home, as “there is no past” (28), and no future in which to reconstruct the concept of home. Jay Ellis claims that in McCarthy’s previous novels “the house – its spatial configurations, both its promise of safety and its limits on freedom – is the most common type” (*No Place for Home* 13). The validity of this statement is not in question here, since *The Road* was not released for Ellis to include in his study of flight and constraint in McCarthy’s work. However, Ellis’s statement is interesting because it indicates that the state of limbo does not allow for an opposition between flight and constraint. The binary terms “promise of safety” and “limits on freedom” depend on each other to exist. But, in *The Road*, everything is “uncoupled from its shoring” (10), meaning that homes and the escape to and from places of constraint are no longer possible. According to Rune Graulund the novel “breaks with [McCarthy’s] famous attention to place” (59), this being the result of the state of limbo reducing the differences between flight and constraint making living in the world a constant flight and constant constraint. As Graulund has observed: “The landscape is so monotonous, so flat and so dull, that it does not really matter whether one moves or stays put” (60), that is if one looks at the impossibility of a future; that the characters by moving should find something better than the present state they are in. However, moving is essential for the father and son’s day to day survival and for keeping a glimmer of hope alive.

The boy playing a flute is one of those moments where there is a glimmer of hope in the story, but the father’s attempt to attach importance beyond this moment of joy with his son fails as the post-apocalyptic state prevents looking towards anything but the isolated event: “He’d carved the boy a flute. A formless music for the age to come or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin” (81). It seems whenever the father observes hopeful things he is also forced to realise that they cannot prevail: “The world

shrinking down about a raw core of parsible identities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. [...] The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. In time to wink out forever” (93). Things fade away and since nothing takes their place the hope tied to those things follows into oblivion.

Chapter 2: The Journey at the End of the World

In our wheels that roll around

As we move over the ground

And all day it seems we've been in between the past and future town

(Bright Eyes – We Are Nowhere And It's Now)

The narrative of a journey in relation to the despairing state of limbo with no possibility of a sustainable future leads us to wonder what are we to make of a journey in a world, which the traveling character himself describes as not offering the means of progress. To get closer to understanding what the journey entails and how it can be interpreted to fit with the state of the post-apocalyptic world one has to look closer at how it deviates from traditional road narratives. Viewing the journey in contrast to traditional road narratives shows that what is normally a narrative of progression becomes another reinforcement of the non-progression; another sign that strengthens the nihilistic reading of the absolute end of the world.

In traditional road narratives, as viewed by Ronald Primeau, roads offer freedom to assess one's situation, both past and future. The motivation for characters embarking on journeys in traditional road novels is the going forth, the progress, the search for new experiences, people and places (127). The road functions as a means of exploring and a process aimed at a better understanding of the self and the surroundings (1). In an attempt to pin down the characteristics of the road novel Primeau arrives at the following conclusion: "Whether highway, river, or bicycle path, the road continues to be a hallowed space to get away, question, make new plans, talk with others, and write fascinating stories" (94). In *The Road*, however, the father and son will be denied such promises as the journey is integrated in the post-apocalyptic state of limbo. The following passage is one of several examples where

the road narrative in the novel complicates and reverses the role of the traditional road narrative:

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all. (28)

People are refugees by the side of the road; they are hopelessly constrained to the road, like prisoners in their own skin. The post-apocalyptic state has created a homeless world, which not even progress through movement on the road can offer escape from: “People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes” (32). Freedom or the quest for freedom is undermined in the sentence “sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined *aviators*¹” (emphasis added). What is ruined here is the optimistic promise of escape or flight using the road, and as a consequence the traditional image of the road as a means to “reaffirm, and explore who they are and where they are going” (Primeau ix-x) is lost. Ellis claims that, “[...] nowhere in McCarthy is there the celebration of freedom that one would expect from a proponent of flight” (*No Place for Home* 29). In *The Road* even the very concept of becoming ceases to exist, because when the post-apocalyptic state reduces the world to one and the same place or reality the road is no longer in opposition to ontological

¹ According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary an Aviator is defined as “an aircraft pilot”. In my interpretation, an Aviator in the context of the novel extract symbolises flying and flying can in turn be said to connote freedom.

place or staying put. The opening of possibilities that roads offer in contrast to place is not possible in *The Road*. Ellis argues that: “a *place* is a construction of the possibilities of *space* into a fixed set of circumstances” (*No Place for Home* 17). In *The Road* this construction of space into place is at a much larger scale. One might say even that the post-apocalyptic state has turned space into place. The reaffirming and exploring Primeau sees as important in road novels is rendered fruitless in *The Road* since the father and his son are, even though they travel, still always in the same place when it comes to the possibilities of creating a better life for themselves.

On the more concrete level of looking at deviations from the road novel genre, McCarthy’s novel reveals an almost step-by-step anti-road-structure. The presupposed elements in a road novel that McCarthy’s novel undermines are: “[J]ourney from preparation to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return and re-entry, and finally, the recording and reconstructing of events in the telling of the story” (Primeau 1). These elements characteristic of a road novel fail the travellers as their journey is taking place in a state of limbo brought on by the apocalypse as discussed in the previous chapter, a state that does not provide the surroundings that make a journey on the road meaningful. In *The Road*, the traveling father and son have no point of departure. The story begins “in medias res” and the father and son are homeless from the start: “[H]e woke in the woods in the dark and cold of the night” (1). They have not chosen to take to the road and there is no predetermined goal. One might argue that they have a goal since they plan to travel south towards the coast. But, my reading of this is that it is not a goal to a full extent. For it to be a goal, in my opinion there needs to be some knowledge from the travellers as to what that goal is and also there is no possibility of choice of goal among the characters: “He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it” (29). The father decides on the coast being their goal, but

admits that he does not believe that reaching the coast will change anything for the better. The goal is still important for the father, but only to inspire him and his son to carry on, which is something the father is aware of: “When you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (78). This would suggest that the journey is a way of keeping the impossibility of progressing towards something better at a distance, which the father manages to do because of his ability to juxtaposition disbelief and a will to carry on.

Planning the journey is almost impossible: “Dark and black and trackless where it crossed the open country. [...] It was no country that he knew. The names of the towns or the rivers” (216). There is no satisfactory point of arrival; the novel ends with the son stepping out onto the road leaving his dead father to continue the journey: “Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road” (306). When the father contemplates him and his son’s journey he hints at the death of the road narrative: “He walked into the road and stood. [...] At a crossroads a ground set with dolmen stones where the spoken bones of oracles lay mouldering. No sound but the wind. What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack? At some reckonable and enabled moment?” (280) There are no surroundings in which to tell the story of their journey, it has no other meaning except for keeping him and his son alive. The extract above along with the visit to an abandoned library represents the end of attempting to record and reconstruct the world: “Years later he’d stood in the charred ruins of a library. [...] Some rage at the lies in their thousands row on row. [...] He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out in the cold gray light” (199). In *The Road* others have taken to the road in their cars in hope of salvation:

Along the interstate in the distance long lines of charred and rusting cars. The raw rims of the wheels sitting in a stiff gray sludge of melted rubber, in blackened rings of wire. The incinerate corpses shrunk to the size of a child and propped on the bare springs of

the seats. Ten thousand dreams ensepulchred within their crozzled hearts. They went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. (292)

To escape using the road proves to be a failure. The crushing of “ten thousand dreams” turns the traditional and positive road quest conventions inside out. The traditional goal oriented and progressive quest that characterizes the narrative of the road novel is lost in the extract above as the devastating fires that haunt the post-apocalyptic world burned all hope of salvation.

For the father and his son, however, the journey manages to keep them from giving up even though the father has no belief in the salvation of the journey. Since no progress is made, the journey as an end in itself most resembles the subgenre of the picaresque. In the picaresque, characters wander aimlessly to undermine a status quo and ridicule the constraints and values of daily life (Primeau 7). Characters break with daily life and become free to choose their journey with the purpose of undermining a status quo; the journey, like in *The Road*, is an end in itself. However, the differences between the picaresque and the journey of the father and son are that the whole world in *The Road* is in status quo and the father and his son cannot but wander aimlessly around. The daily, civil life is irrevocably lost and in the void of the present their journey has the sole purpose of clinging to what little hope the sheer movement of their journey can offer, or just simply keeping themselves occupied.

Chapter 3: Interpreting the Journey: Is there Hope?

Nearing the end of the novel the father and the boy arrive at the coast, finally reaching the goal which gave them a reason to continue their journey on the road, despite the father all along having no belief in their potential to progress. At the coast they find nothing and the sea is no different from the world they have travelled in so far: “Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of” (230). The sea is a new place, but the setting is the same. The father is again forced to admit that the world does not allow progress. The waves resemble the wind and pendulum inland: “Waiting. Waiting. Then the slow boom falling downshore. The seething hiss of it washing over the beach and drawing away again” (233). The surroundings do not change and more importantly they never improve: “these narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal” (Heffernan 5). The father and son, “each the other’s world entire” (4), move within a world that offers nothing: “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. [...] The crushing black vacuum of the universe” (138). Despite observing this disheartening truth the father cannot give up and decides that moving into the blackness that is the future is still worthwhile. When the boy asks if they are going to die the father stubbornly replies: “We’re going to drink some water. Then we’re going to keep going down the road” (92). The description of the surroundings above is said to be the absolute truth of the world, this truth tells us that what is left of the meaningful pre-apocalyptic world is merely the father and son themselves, the rest is a “crushing black vacuum”.

The post-apocalyptic world does no longer have the surroundings needed for supporting belief and meaning beyond the moments of hope in the relationship between the father and the boy even if they are referred to as the morally “good guys” that “carry the fire”. For what it is worth, these good guys might stay true to their moral codes but since it is not a question

of if but when the world becomes completely inhabitable, their morals and goodness cannot be seen as the seeds of a better world.

Wielenberg suggests that “the man keeps on going despite recognizing, at some level, that the struggle may very well be futile. [...] Among these is the belief that he is on a divine mission. It is not that he wants to keep going because he believes that he is on a divine mission. Rather, the desire comes first: because he wants to keep going, he believes—or tries to believe—that he is on a divine mission” (3). Wielenberg seems to point to the father’s perseverance and courage as he manages to go on down the road, but given the father’s contemplations of the novel’s bleak surroundings, this idea of a “divine mission” that the father is supposed to believe in seems at best to be deluded optimism on the part of both the father and Wielenberg. The father’s mission is simply to keep his son alive for as long as he is able to, and this mission also helps the father to block out the hopelessness in the post-apocalyptic world.

Cecilia Lidberg interprets the father and son’s journey as offering hope for a future beyond the apocalyptic world. She argues that hope lies to a great extent in the goodness shown by these two characters and their belief within: “When the man eventually dies because of a long illness, they haven’t geographically reached a goal. However, the man has reached a goal within. He has come to be so certain of his son’s prosperous future, that he can die calmly. [...] It is, for the moment, a happy ending” (23). Carole Juge may not be as convinced as Lidberg of the son’s future, but she nevertheless believes in a future for the boy: “After all, the post apocalyptic winter of their discontent can hopefully be turned into glorious summer by this son” (27). It is true that the father urges his son to carry on by filling him with belief: “You need to keep going. You don’t know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You’ll be lucky again. You’ll see. Just go. It’s all right” (297). But how much importance are we able to attach to these expressions of belief by the father? Lydia R. Cooper

comes close to explaining the father's momentary expressions of belief by claiming that the "juxtaposition, taking place inside the father, is to [her] understanding the cause of the actual road's juxtaposition of danger as well as escape from danger. The road's double nature causes the father to be, "poised between two disparate possible realities [...] the juxtaposition of revelations of the father's internal lack of belief with his external actions expressing belief" (224). The "disparate possible realities" present in the character of the father enables him to express belief through words and action when he is together with the boy while, as discussed in chapter one, consciously knowing that no progress can be made. In reality, the father wants to take the boy with him in death, but he cannot force himself to such an action: "I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant" (298). Further, the father expresses through his obsessive need for keeping the boy alive a survival instinct that is misinterpreted as being genuine manifestation of hope for his son's future. In fact the journey of survival that motivates the father shows that it is sometimes easier to carry on than giving up even if giving up is the better option. Because if the father was so sure about the future of his son, why does he still wish he had the power to take his son with him in death? At the end of the novel the father dies and the son continues the journey in the same desolate landscape of a lost world. In the light of this it makes it difficult to argue that the father "has come to be certain of his son's prosperous future" or even argue then that there is a happy ending to this novel, if only "for the moment" as Lidberg claims. Again, quoting Teresa Heffernan on post-apocalyptic narratives seems relevant here: "these narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal [...] and there is no resolution or salvation" (5). In *The Road*, the only resolution is that there is no resolution; the journey is simply part of the process of the ending of the world.

Jay Ellis like Lidberg, seems to move towards a unanimous interpretation of a not prosperous, but better future for the orphan boy through emphasising the boy's meeting with

another family of good guys: “But we have turned the page beyond the very end of our world and seen the beginning—however fragile—of a new one. The woman’s reassurance is not to an old man going to sleep, but to a young one just awakening to what “the fire” might now truly promise: love beyond a father and son in a world dying from the rage of men. Indeed, hope beyond reason” (“Another Sense of Ending” 38). Can the beginning of a new world consist of hope beyond reason? When taking into account the whole ending and not merely the boy’s meeting with a new family of good guys, the boy and his newfound friends seem merely a scene of illusion in terms of a new beginning. The novel’s final paragraph makes the boy’s temporary survival stand in contrast to a definite end of nature, as human survival is undercut by the dead surroundings: “Once there where brook trout in the streams in the mountains. On their backs were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing that could not be put back. Not be made right again” (307). This final paragraph describes how there is blind faith in man’s capability to, on his own, “satisfy the desire for continuity, truth, transcendence, and a sense of purpose” (Heffernan 5). In *The Road* the boy’s survival might be seen as momentarily satisfying but it is not a sign of hope for salvation and therefore probably more frustrating than satisfying after finishing the final paragraph of the novel.

Wielenberg argues that the journey of the father and son emphasises the importance of morality in humans, of not treating other humans as mere objects, because humans are living objects as opposed to dead things: “By struggling to be a good guy and keeping his big promise, the man manages to keep the child’s faith in humanity alive. This faith in humanity enables the child to trust the veteran, which in turn allows him to attain salvation—earthly salvation, in the form of meaningful connections with other human beings” (14). This argument certainly rings true, and the father and his son’s moral code upholds this; they do not become cannibals for one. But, the fact that Wielenberg does not mention the living

environment, only humans is somewhat troubling and missing in his analysis. The settings in the novel, the surroundings, nature, which are fundamental for the survival of the human civilisation, are dead, gone. Therefore, morality is essential but not enough; enough in satisfying a moment of hope, but the dead surroundings obstruct all lengthy progress in building something on that hope. The boy's survival beyond the ending of the novel may for the reader offer a sense of relief and an opportunity to view the novel's ending as positive. But, it seems to have also led critics to conclude, perhaps out of a sentimental wish for the orphan boy that there is hope for humanity because of the goodness he shows and that we have witnessed the glimpse of a new beginning. But as Kenneth Warren suggests: "[In realism] the redemption of the individual lay within the social world," but in sentimental fiction, "the redemption of the social world lay with the individual" (75-76). Wielenberg's interpretation of hope and Ellis' interpretation of a new beginning subscribes to the sentimental reading *only* as their interpretations of hope for humanity are based solely on individual goodness ignoring the importance of the surrounding social world for support. If considering the realistic view one is forced to realize that both the social and natural world in which redemption may be sought has vanished and can "[n]ot be made right again" (307), thus both views confirm that there is no hope for a future in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel.

Conclusion

The father and son “carry the fire”, meaning that they follow a moral code thus keeping virtue intact even post-civilisation. The post-apocalyptic road in limbo may not as such speak to us about the end of civility but in all probability, the end of civilisation, for despite the goodness shown by the father and the boy the last train towards saving civilisation has long since left: “If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again” (192). There can be no belief in the lasting effects of staying sane and behaving morally after the end of the world. And as we read about the beautiful struggle from the father and his son out of love for each other, it makes us also read out of fear for what might happen to us and what we stand to lose.

The salvation for humanity, as it stands at the end of *The Road*, is nowhere to be seen. The damage is already done and the world is beyond repair. The world is declining and not progressing as many critics are led to believe when the boy survives beyond the ending of the novel, leaving the readers’ in the dark about his destiny. If the novel was set in the pre-apocalyptic world that still had the surroundings the post-apocalyptic limboic world has rendered meaningless, then goodness and morality along with an open ending in the boy’s survival would indeed offer hope of improvement and progress. But with the loss of positive concepts of progress such as dreams, change, a past and a future on which to build hope, the road is a one-way ticket towards the end of humanity where the good guys morals will eventually vanish. The road is merely another place of constraint in a world that cannot contain humans any longer and the undermining of the road as image of progress reasserts the Western myth of becoming, and an uncomfortable question echoes from the world in *The Road* to ours: Will we end up like the travellers in the road with a road that promised much but now offers so little?

Even if the boy at the end of the story finds goodness beyond his father in the meeting with a family that shows empathy for others, the majority of humans left in the world are driven by self-interest preying on others and in this way *The Road's* portrayal of man in the post-apocalypse is not different from man in our present time. *The Road* does not give a reason for the apocalypse and should not be viewed as an extreme dystopia because it is a realistic portrayal of what stands to happen if for example, climate problems get out of hand or should a nuclear war erupt. The goodness and love in the relationship between the father and the boy is a sentimental celebration of the human spirit that portrays a realistic warning about what we stand to lose when there is no turning back; when there is no longer a possibility for that spirit to flourish and we are “placing hopes where [we have] no reason to” (TR 228).

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