



## ***The Road: A Study of the Apocalypse Narrative and Nihilistic World-Building***

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### Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents a bleak and nihilistic world, yet the narrative also highlights the importance of hope and positivity amidst all the chaos. This paper investigates the relationship between the nihilistic elements of the novel and the directionally challenged world in which the protagonists navigate. This study specifically aims to uncover the role of hope in constructing the apocalypse narrative and how it counters the nothingness that permeates the story. Additionally, this paper examines McCarthy's narrative style and its contribution to the nihilistic world-building found in the novel. Drawing on earlier works by McCarthy, this study demonstrates how his writing style shapes the portrayal of a globally warmed and pollution-stricken generation, reinforcing the novel's overarching themes of despair and desolation. Finally, this paper argues that *The Road* is not merely a story of nihilism but a complex exploration of the human capacity for hope in the face of overwhelming adversity. By analyzing the novel's narrative structure, themes, and language, this study sheds light on how McCarthy's unique style contributes to the creation of a powerful and thought-provoking apocalyptic narrative.

Keywords: Apocalypse Narrative, Nihilism, Desolation, Meaninglessness, Hope

### Introduction

*I had a dream, which was not all a dream.  
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars  
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,  
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air* (Byron, 1995).

The paranoid vision of the future in Lord Byron's poem "Darkness" is an environmental and an ethical warning. This poem roughly begs the question related to the origin of catastrophes. Imagining the end of the world, as humans and other life forms meet

the end has been as old as the written history goes. *The Epic of Ziusudra*, a work of Sumerian culture that emerged in Babylonia, tells the story of Ziusudra which is only known from one fragmentary Sumerian tablet that was published in 1914 by Arno Poebel and dates to the 17th century BC (the Old Babylonian Empire). The poem's opening section discusses the origin of humans and other animals as well as the establishment of the five prehistoric towns of Eridu, Badtibira, Larak, Sippar, and Shuruppak. The flood was ordered to wipe off humans for some unknown purpose; but the existence of the relevant paragraph has been destroyed. However, at least some of the gods appeared to be sorry for their choice. Enki, the water god, was most likely the one who managed to save humanity. He revealed the terrible choice of the gods to Ziusudra, the Sumerian version of the Biblical narrative also matches Noah's tale, a devout, god-fearing, and modest monarch, and counseled him to save himself by constructing a very huge boat (Kramer, 1972). This doomsday scenario also resonates with the later tales of Noah where almost all of the world's classic literature echoes as a world-ending flood in which a messiah with an ark saved human and animal life from extinction. He is described as the tenth and last patriarch before the Flood in Abrahamic religions. His tale is told in the Quran where his journey is described as a "sign for all peoples (Ali, 2005)!" This similar semiotic reference, the savior narrative, personified with a hero of hope has also been mentioned in the Baha'i scriptures, and *The Book of Genesis* in chapters 5–9. Numerous additional Bible literature, including the *New Testament* and related deuterocanonical works, make mention of Noah. In his tenth and Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road* Cormac McCarthy depicts a similar despairing and a surely doomed world. Unlike Byron, his near extinct fictional image of the human civilization resonates the last judgment which is "collective and admits no exception (Morton, 1995)" and the image of the doomed America paves a path to elemental human associations to nihilism as he looked for deemed hope in the storyline, among the protagonists who travels South with a shopping cart and among the moral questions wafted from this roadless and mapless wasteland. This paper aims to study McCarthy's motifs of placing hope as a narrative focus as well as his rejection of conventional ideas of naming and direction in an apocalypse driven narrative story-world.

### **Nihilism and Moral Obligations**

Etymologically and philosophically the concept of Nihilism can be understood as the "negation, rejection, or denial of some or all aspects of thought or life (Craig, 2005)." Ivan Turgenev, in his most successful novel *Fathers and Sons* responded to the growing tension that he observed as a cultural divide between 1830s–1840s liberals and the burgeoning nihilist movement. The term "nihilism," which gained widespread use after Turgenev's book was released in 1862. Nihilism as a term has a history way back in the Middle Ages where it was used to define heretics as nihilists. It later took shape in the 18<sup>th</sup>

Century derived from the German word “Nihilismus” (Gertz, 2019). Eventually it took shape as a formative philosophical, political, and moral counterposing of the meaning of everything in philosophy.

Nihilism was most likely originally applied to critique Aleksandr Pushkin in the 1829 essay in the *Messenger of Europe* by N.I. Nadezhdin, a Russian literary critic and the country's first ethnographer. Both he and V.V. Bervi equated nihilism and skepticism in 1858. Nihilism was portrayed as a social threat because it rejected all moral values as Mikhail Nikiforovich Katkov, a well-known conservative journalist who saw nihilism as synonymous with revolution. The German “Nihilismus”, the Late Latin “nihilismus”, or the French “nihilisme” are likely where the phrase first appeared in English.

Soren Kierkegaard proposed an early nihilism which he called “leveling”. According to him, leveling is the process of stifling individuality to the point when it is nonexistent and nothing significant about one's existence can be affirmed as, public “[which] annihilates all the relative concretions of individuality ” (1978). It also resonates with the idea of the public self which Dreyfus thinks as “if everything is up for choice, including the standards on the basis of which one chooses, there is no reason for choosing one set of standards rather than another (1999).” What he meant by “choosing different” standards by which is the Western Civilization regulates its political and societal ideologies is the same ideology that Fredrich Nietzsche has deferred elementally. The German philosopher presented a thorough diagnosis of nihilism as a pervasive phenomenon of Western society, which is frequently linked to nihilism. Although the idea recurs repeatedly throughout Nietzsche's writing, employed in several contexts with various implications and meanings. According to Nietzsche, the contingent value of life and its implications can mostly be characterized as "a condition of tension, as a disproportion between what we want to value (or need) and how the world appears to operate (Carr, 1992)." He also thinks that Nihilism is inevitable and unavoidable like a collective force:

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? Point of departure: it is an error to consider "social distress" or "physiological degeneration" or, worse, corruption, as the cause of nihilism (Nietzsche, 1968).

For Nietzsche the formation of Nihilism is a result of science making Judeo-Christian beliefs and consenting its subscribers to adhere to the master-slave morality which essentially marks the demise of its activism, and he thinks that this active-pessimism is the cause of nihilism (*ibid*). This is one of the reasons he thinks a “Dead God” is purposefully sanctioned and ruled over by science and technology. Although nihilism essentially negates the meanings of life, the general implication of negation refers to the denial of reality instead of confronting it by believing in different worlds rather than the present. The idea of rejection can perhaps be understood as the binary opposite of hope as both share the same energy, but their roadmaps do not match but they are “trying to make ourselves feel powerful rather than admitting our own weaknesses.

Nihilism is thus much closer to optimism, idealism, and sympathy than it is to pessimism, cynicism, and apathy (Gertz, 2019).” Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is a crucial investigation of this theorem as he sought for hope in an overtly near extinct scenario where the idea of carrying the “fire” resonates with building an arc in order to save humanity. Although he rejected the concept of heroism and tried to defy the traditionalist ideas of the ‘ark’ or even a ‘chalice’, it certainly can be assumed that McCarthy has proposed to us the inevitability to embrace humanism as a foundational narrative. As Jacques Lacan reflects the idea of the unconscious as both the displacement and the condensation where they are the elevation of a linguistic network (Barry, 2017), in *The Road*, the author finds the same idea in a less heroic manner. This concept sides with Jung’s relational archetypes, which shows that shared, mental and reflected images in primordial symbols which also fits into his archetypal hypothesis that played an important role in identifying conscious behavior (Jung, 2014). Although the collective unconscious is sometimes seen as unscientific, Jung defended psychology’s legitimacy by arguing that underneath individual differences there is a universal personality. As such, it represented an additional effort to address the personal equation’s issue (Shamdasani, 2003). In *The Road* McCarthy did not only reject the idea of traditional narrative but he also devalued the idea of nihilism as the dead center of the novel that resonates the primeval journey towards positivity.

### **Nihilism in *The Road***

*The Road* is a legacy of other novels that earned McCarthy a critical readership and Hollywood success with films like *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. In between the narrative folds of nihilism and the seemingly disintegrated storyworld consisting of a near extinct planet of *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy draws a journey for survival with the everlasting yearning for positivity through the ashen roads of Southern United States. The Father-Son duo’s quest for life and hope in an apocalypse is a fundamental element of the central narrative. *The Road* is unique in its optimistic view amidst nihilism, with a linguistic journey, exploring memory for meaning compared to other “end of the world” tales.

The story-world in the novel starts after a disaster which has never been explained, but in no time it plunges readers into its bleak premise which has been harrowed by destruction, murders, rape and cannibalism. McCarthy forges a narrative that can collectively merge literary genres like science fiction, climate fiction and dystopian fiction. This novel has bleached the iron gripped division among “para-literatures” and contemporary fiction which Christopher Pizzino believes as, “is flexible at present, claims about the literary nature of *The Road* have tended either to be rigidly exclusive or to allocate a portion of sf for McCarthy’s use (2010).” In the Vanity Fair Interview, the author prefers science integration in fiction and sides with physicists with “extraordinary flowerings” in human enterprise. He prefers befriending scientists over others, as they “changed reality

(Nast, 2005)."

We get a spark of what happened during the disaster in the earlier part of the novel. There is a brief account of what the Father witnessed on the night the world ended which he describes as "A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions (McCarthy, 2007)." It could lead us to anything like a nuclear war, a volcanic eruption, and a meteor strike. Though McCarthy has specifically left this space vague and left it to the readers to decode but the reader can, however, eliminate the super volcano as a viable explanation through the reference in the sentence later in the same paragraph, which said, "He went into the bathroom and threw the light switch but the power was already gone (*ibid*)." It might either be the meteor strike or the electromagnetic pulse from the nuclear explosion. The father and son's journey in *The Road* has roots in Southern Gothic fiction but stands out with its continuous narrative and strong sense of autofiction. The wasteland theme is not new, but McCarthy sees the ashes as a reflection of the real world's lack of humanity. McCarthy's second novel *Outer Dark* explores nothingness through Rinty's story of having her brother's child. Culla abandons a child in the woods to die, lying to his sister that it passed away and needed burying. Rinty sets out to find the baby on her own after discovering the truth. The time and place in the novel are unclear, but the ending imagery suggests it's legacy of nihilism being carried by *The Road*:

Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth's curve...[A] stale wind blew from this desolation and the marsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like arsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like things chained. He wondered why a road should come to such a place (*ibid*).

McCarthy also has chosen a similar situation for *The Road* when the father has the same vision of the forest:

He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds (*ibid*).

The meaning of life as portrayed in this novel is quite like what Camus felt about the essential purpose of life in general. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus asserts that the confounded establishment of meaning is rather a "confrontation between the human need [for at least some meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world [that attributes to nothingness] (Camus, 1991)." Camus believed human need is temporary and based on mass production and duplication. He saw life as meaningless but worth living because of the connection between absurdism and nihilism. He felt his generation was plagued by nihilism due to their failure to overcome the absurd. Camus reached this view through his

interaction with Dostoevsky and the reevaluation of nihilistic implications of absurdity and shared values. McCarthy sounds synonymous to Camus but puts hope as a central theme in his novels, as seen in the *Blood Meridian*. The protagonist's attitude towards others in the novel is primitive and the universal fight between good versus evil as seen in the portrayal of the 'good' and the 'bad' guys. In search for the 'good guys' in *The Road* the protagonist duo considers them as the emblem of goodness and differentiates their actions, though somehow let them question their standing in their own philosophy but they kept on going like Marlow's journey in *Heart of Darkness* or Perceval's search for the Grail in Chretien de Troyes' *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*. McCarthy's novel aims to create a modern 'good guy' and draws inspiration from the story of Noah, where the ark saves the earth from extinction after a flood.

*The Road* references medieval grail narrative and challenges generic place naming through his ambitious nihilism, showing the madness and insanity of Earth. As a statement that McCarthy uses that David Holloway thinks is his "late modernism," as it is the style "that seizes upon the postmodern to use it against itself and negate it dialectically from within. But a kind of writing that also remains self-consciously mired in what it strives to go beyond (Holloway, 2002)." The apocalypse, the denial of the existence of the traditional system and all the violence suggests that the madness that McCarthy wants the readers to see is not entirely fictional rather has roots in his influences from both Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as both has a unique take on nihilism. From Melville's "Call me Ishmael" to McCarthy's "See the Child" in *Blood Meridian* and "Carrying the Fire" in *The Road* the seminal idea has been the same. The primal insecurity of sanity, when the wife talks about the eventual degradation of humanity and her fears of losing life and the futility of survival,

The one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together a passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart (McCarthy, 2010a).

The end of the world, whether it be religious or natural, would put doubts on purpose whether it be religious or materialistic to settle into one singularity. Survival is the keyword that perhaps goes above the human made differences that exist. In terms of this novel, the near extinction has put the nature of the protagonists into the venture of finding the meaning of life and death which Ishmael in *Moby Dick* calls as:

So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God (Melville, 2018).

*The Road* is a new kind of fiction that feels like an argument and a tale of absence, and a critique of the current paradigm of endless collapse of moral judgment. McCarthy's world

is obviously eroding, but the book celebrates what Lydia Cooper calls "the creative energy of language as a prophetic 'gathering' of mankind" in the face of that loss (Cooper, 2011). Perhaps this idea of 'fathering' and "carrying out the fire" seems similar from the reading of *Don Quixote* as it whims about the meaning of sanity in general:

I am at death's door; I should like to make myself ready to die in such a way as to indicate that my life has not been so very wicked as to leave me with a reputation as a madman; for even though this is exactly what I have been, I'd rather not confirm this truth in the way in which I die (Saavedra, 2003).

Though it feels like *The Road* walks between the borderlines of posthumanism and ecocritical criticism of present natural exhaustion that might lead to apocalyptic natural events. Though nihilism occupies most of the novel's canvas, underneath the folds of the plot-character dynamics, it is unexpectedly optimistic and can also be referred to as a linguistic journey towards redemption in a decluttered landscape.

### **Apocalypse Narrative and the Archetypal Storyworld in *The Road*:**

Apocalyptic novels are a genre of literature that typically deals with the end of the world or a cataclysmic event that brings about a major change in human history. The storyworld that McCarthy creates in *The Road* is a wasteland filled with ash, rubble, and decay. The environment is barren and inhospitable, with little to no vegetation, animals, or natural resources. The sky is perpetually gray, and the air is polluted with ash and smoke. The landscape is dotted with abandoned towns and cities, where the remnants of humanity have either died or resorted to cannibalism to survive. Although, the notion of an apocalypse or catastrophic end to the world has become less prominent, the desire for a harmonious and unified community remains a persistent dream at the conclusion of human history. Frank Kermode posits that even though the fear of the apocalypse has dissipated, the underlying archetypes of apocalyptic literature continue to influence how we comprehend and interpret the world around us (Kermode, 2000).

Apocalyptic literature, which has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is often characterized by using pseudonyms, a narrative structure, and the use of esoteric language. It is also known for its pessimistic outlook on the present and the belief that the final events are approaching rapidly. In contemporary secular discourse, the term "apocalypse" retains its original meaning of "unveiling" or "revealing" from the ancient Greek word "apokalupsis" (Hornby, 2020). This concept forms the basis for the nineteenth-century teleological storyline of modern nationalism, which asserts that the emergence of the nation marks the culmination of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006)."

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch famously stated, "The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience (Lee, 2004)." This powerful message speaks to the book's overarching theme, which highlights the importance

of personal responsibility and moral action. Similarly, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy explores the idea of conscience in a world that has lost its bearings. Despite the unnamed apocalypse that has left the environment and society in shambles, the novel's protagonist, the Boy, maintains a strong moral compass that guides his journey. In this post-apocalyptic world devoid of direction, the Boy's quest serves as a beacon of hope, as he navigates the uncharted territory with no map or guide. McCarthy masterfully portrays the concept of "placelessness" in a world that is nameless, yet rich with the complexity of human morality.

As Jacques Derrida writes, "By its very tone, the mixing of voices, genres, and codes, and the breakdown [le detraquement] of destinations, apocalyptic discourse can also dismantle the dominant contract or concordat" (Derrida, 1984). The archetypes in this stories also follow the similar destinations like the relationship between the father and boy in *The Road* is central to the story, and can be seen as an archetype of the father-son relationship. The father represents the caregiver, protector, and mentor, while the boy represents the future, hope, and innocence which Jung emphasizes the importance of archetypal foundations in our consciousness and warns against attempting to deny or neutralize them, as this can lead to a rootless and susceptible consciousness. Instead, he suggests that we must continually reinterpret and connect the past with the present to avoid this outcome and maintain a meaningful sense of identity and purpose (McCarthy, 2007).

At the very core, this novel is a climate fiction. *The Road's* evocative and haunting nature takes readers on a journey through a world devastated by an unspecified apocalypse which McCarthy describes as, "A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions (*ibid*)." His writing hints at potential catastrophic events that could result from the current situation. The range of possibilities is broad and includes scenarios such as a nuclear war, a volcanic eruption, or a meteor strike. While McCarthy intentionally leaves this space open for interpretation, careful reading suggests that a super volcano is not a likely explanation, as indicated by a later reference to a power outage. For instance, when the father entered the bathroom and attempted to turn on the light switch, it did not work because the power had already gone out (*ibid*) it might suggest a meteor strike or a nuclear fallout. Set in a barren wasteland, the novel follows the story of a father and the boy as they travel through a harsh and unforgiving landscape in search of safety, shelter, and food. The storyworld has been set such a way that it hints that beyond the rubble there is far to discover as they travel south with seemingly no map and direction.

The novel is a journey narrative, with the father and son traveling through a post-apocalyptic landscape in search of safety and a new life. This archetype represents the search for meaning, growth, and transformation. The Journey itself can be seen through the lens of an correlative object found in myths, religious metanarratives and contemporary content making where the "mythic perspective" remains intact in the collective unconscious (Evans, 2018).

From the opening pages of the novel, the readers are plunged into a world that has

been ravaged by disaster, leaving few survivors to fend for themselves. The father and the boy's journey towards the coast takes them through a landscape that is both beautiful and terrifying, as they encounter other survivors who are equally desperate and dangerous. This journey can be termed as far as the Jungian archetypes go as “the heroes’ journey,” leading to the protagonists to face challenges, overcome obstacles, and ultimately achieve a goal. This archetype represents the struggle for self-discovery and personal growth as Jung refers “The hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious” (Jung, 2014). Overcoming the fate and embracing the obvious has probably been the nature and the seminal idea of the text.

Walter Benjamin reflects the role of fate in art as:

The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about (McCarthy, 2007).

It is also emblematic as the novel's protagonists' dwell of the shadow of nothingness and finds the “warmth” that Benjamin mentions as an archetype which represented in the novel through the various threats and dangers that the father and the boy encounter throughout the story (1969). These threats represent the darkness and evil that exists within the human psyche. Essentially, this dystopian novel portrays the collapse of the established and celebrated cultural canvas, through its diverse use of language, serve as a testament to the possibility of a cultural renewal. This viewpoint stands in contrast to Andrew Hoberek's recent interpretation, which associates the novel's overall tone of exhaustion with a perceived stylistic exhaustion (Hoberek, 2011). However, it is not necessarily accurate to suggest that *The Road* completely abandons the same stylistic suspicion evident in his other noteworthy novel, *Blood Meridian*, even if the novel's prose is less ornate or flashy.

McCarthy's writing style is sparse and poetic, creating a vivid and haunting portrait of a world that has been destroyed by an unknown catastrophe. The father's determination to protect his son from the dangers of the world they live in is both admirable and heartbreaking, as he tries to prepare him for the inevitable. It is also hinted that there is a rise of the “new hero” from the rubble (Morton, 1995). When the father dreams of a nightmarish vision of the monster which is “pale and naked and translucent (McCarthy, 2007), it is realized that the novel offers bleakness at it's surface but when he says to the boy that "carrying the fire" is perhaps the only thing that they can do in this situation.

When the father's condition worsens from a wound, he wants to end the life of the boy as well reflecting the same vibe that his wife felt before she ended her life, “They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't

face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't (*ibid*).” But he prefers to let him learn to survive on his own, drawing on the lessons his father has taught him and his own innate resilience. The novel ends with the son setting out on his own, uncertain of what the future holds, but determined to continue his journey and find a way to survive.

*The Road* is a powerful exploration of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversity. It examines themes of love, loss, and hope, and highlights the resilience and determination of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming odds. McCarthy's evocative writing style and the novel's vivid and haunting imagery make it a powerful and thought-provoking read that is sure to stay with readers long after the last page has been turned. The nihilistic storyworld provoked in the novel offers more than it is described. Then ashen lands and the near extinct societies with cannibals, rapists and murderers paved the way for McCarthy to understand and depict the questions that has been asked over time, what is like to be human when all that is left is nothing.

### Conclusion

The narrative voice in *The Road* presents a conundrum that enhances the novel's mysterious quality and brings it closer to the realm of fable. Despite the lack of identifiable characters, historical context, and plot, the novel achieves a heightened intensity through its anonymity. In this sense, the novel confirms its late modernist credentials in a seemingly non-modernist form. Additionally, the novel's emphasis on the inadequacy of books in the face of disaster does not diminish the power of literature. Instead, McCarthy's use of older forms reminds us of the importance of literature in keeping the past alive and aiding the present in its search for meaning. *The Road* serves as a poignant letter of a novel that reminds us that literature can provide a flicker of hope in an otherwise dark and desolate world. McCarthy's vision of a wasteland may seem like an extended paranoia; it serves as a powerful commentary on our present reality and the potential consequences of our actions. Through *The Road*, McCarthy presents a new kind of fiction that rejects the postmodern condition and explores the posthuman condition. The boy's desire for philosophical understanding and his role as a symbol of regeneration offer a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak world. The novel's rejection of conventional navigation and its emphasis on images of nothingness to possibility share the importance of clinging to elemental hope in the face of disaster. Nihilism and hope, the two primal images, play significant roles in the novel, providing a fighting chance for the boy and a promise for future generations to carry the fire. Despite the lack of identifiable characters, events, and plot, the novel achieves greater intensity and enigmatic credentials through anonymity. McCarthy's return to older forms reminds us of the importance of literature in keeping the past alive and aiding the present in its search for meaning. Overall, *The Road* offers a metaphysical healing of the disaster future and presents the boy as an antidote to modern

toxicity.

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