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## The Road to Post Apocalyptic Fiction: McCarthy's Challenges to Post-Apocalyptic Genre

Glenna M. Andrade

*Roger Williams University*, Gandrade8474@outlook.com

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Glenna M. Andrade, Ph.D  
Roger Williams University  
Delivered at the Popular Culture Association Conference  
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*The Road* to Post Apocalyptic Fiction:  
McCarthy's Challenges to  
Post-Apocalyptic Genre

Ever since Walter Miller's now-classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, I have been intrigued by Post-Apocalyptic Fiction. More recently, the genre seems to have experienced its own rebirth of popularity--by word-of-mouth, web discussions, and short story collections, most recently, *Wastelands* (2008). PA fiction finds a venue in recent films, such as *Legend* and *Children of Men*, in TV productions, *The Day After* and *World After Humans*, and even the TV series, *Jericho*. Then too, full-length novels are cultivating readers, from King's *The Stand* to S.M. Stirling's *The Change* series. The theme is even inherent now in non-fiction programs, such as the History Channel's speculation about the seven biblical stages of the Apocalypse. Most certainly, the up well of PA novels in the mid-1900's evolved from the realization that global destruction was not only possible, but also plausible (Miller and Greenberg, 3). This second resurgence may derive from a newer fear of world devastation such as created by humans as in the 9/11 tragedy or by a seemingly impending and unsolvable disaster such as global warming.

One of the newest offerings of Post Apocalyptic fiction is *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006). *The Road* is set in the United States after some undetermined apocalypse, although the immediate effect is nuclear winter. We follow a man and his son as they negotiate the devastated landscape of fire and ash eight years later, hoping to find

safety and warmth in the southeast. The unnamed father and son must survive by scavenging the landscape where the only living creatures are mostly vicious humans, and perhaps one dog. Still, *The Road* is more than a simple quest for a safe home. It challenges the boundaries of the typical Post Apocalypse novel and complicates the usual, hopeful ending.

### **Challenge to Genre**

*The Road* both follows Post-Apocalypse genre expectations and yet disrupts them. At its worst, PA fiction is a mere shift of scene for swashbuckling heroes who suffer no shortage of gasoline, bullets, or leather. At other times, humans cope with antagonists who have the advantage of preposterous physiology, magic gifts derived from the fantasy genre, superior technology, or supernatural gifts, such as being vampiric in nature, like the creatures in *Legend*. Where PA fiction becomes compelling, however, is when the setting avoids contrived possibilities and delves into plausibilities. When the story becomes less techno-thriller or punish-the-mad scientist, it lends itself better to speculative fiction rather than to social parody. As genre, *The Road* incorporates the some familiar themes of both film and fiction, the themes of disaster (Sontag) and survival (Broderick), and as I would argue, mastery.<sup>i</sup>

Although speaking particularly about SF film, Susan Sontag (1974) and Mick Broderick's (1993) observations about the film genre also ring true for SF novels. In part, Sontag explains modern anxiety as the basis of the disaster theme whereas Broderick examines the genre as an appeal to the survival instinct. Sontag postulates that human anxiety can be seen in such themes as human fears of becoming alien food (46), of individual and collective deaths (47), and of insanity (49). Broderick not only rejects

Sontag's disaster theme, but also views the dominant discursive mode of Post-Apocalypse texts as concerned with survival that simultaneously reinforces patriarchal law and provides a fantasy of agrarian "social harmony" (1).

A sub-genre of Science Fiction, Post Apocalypse stories tend to depict the sharp reality of the immediate survival of humans after a world catastrophe.<sup>ii</sup> Some PA fictions center upon the disaster itself whereas others, such as *The Road*, attend to the immediate consequences and the impetus of survival and personal mastery, where the cause is not central to the action (Bitchkittie 2005). For instance, the immediate cause of the disaster is described vaguely as a series of booms and a bright light, possibly a nuclear attack, but not certainly.

When conforming to the genre, *The Road* includes the father as a typical survivor of the old world to serve as a bridge from the old world to the new, often commenting on the positive qualities or the earlier "morality" (Broderick 17) of the world left behind (Broderick 10). In fact, his memories thread the narrative because the son has little past worth remembering. In addition, *The Road* fits under Broderick's subcategory of "Terminal" texts in because the end of the world is depicted as "total ecocide," especially integrating Nuclear Winter, and "genocide" (11-12).

Alternately, *The Road* steps into another genre, according to Cleave (4) into the horror realm. However, there are no fantastical elements, such as zombies, or ghosts, or ghouls, or supernatural or demonic causes. Even the horror genre's feature of dismemberment is not gratuitous, but rather a logical, if atrocious, consequence of human starvation. Cleave categorizes *The Road* as adventure story and epic (4) or a grail quest in

an underworld (5),<sup>1</sup> but ultimately a “lyrical epic of horror” (6). In truth, this unusual combination of lyrical descriptions of the landscape in sharp contrast to the details of eco-disaster, deprivation, and cannibalism may provide one of the more compelling aspects of this novel. While some SF texts may contain poetical descriptions, such as those by Ray Bradbury for instance, very few Post Apocalypse novels juxtapose lyricism with horror.

In addition to stretching the confines of genre, the main character of *The Road* transcends the usual Post Apocalypse hero. As one critic proposes, the typical survivor is often of one of three categories, the rugged individualist, the bandit, or the world-weary sophisticate (Bailey 287). Generally, the emphasis on the young individualist posits a happy ending whereas the sophisticated, even world-weary, ironic character predicts a terminal end for humanity. Our unnamed hero in *The Road* fits neither off these very well. Whereas the more typical hero is very healthy, *The Road*'s protagonist is dying slowly, shown by his worsening cough. Whereas the more typical hero is interested in acquiring or protecting women as in a romance, *The Road*'s protagonist is a patient, knowledgeable, and innately honorable father. He is in the most horrible situation of trying to educate his son about the best of the old world and the worst of the new, of deciding whether to kill his son mercifully to prevent a worse death, and of providing for safety, food, and shelter along their journey. Altogether, it is the father's need for mastery in both his external struggles and his inner conflicts reveal that *The Road* centers much more upon character development and creative descriptions than does the more typical Post Apocalypse text.

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### **Challenge to the hopeful ending**

*The Road* presents a rather ambiguous conclusion about whether humankind will survive as such. Some Post Apocalypse novels end with humans in new forms, such as in *Oryx and Crake* or as in *Legend*. However, this option is not indicated here, unless, of course, cannibalism becomes the dominant mode of existence.

In the world of film, nearly all Post Apocalypse movies end with a hope for survival of the human species and the suggestion of a communal rebirth to prevent total extinction (Broderick 12-17). One exception may be *On the Beach* where survivors await death with a stiff upper lip. Although science and technology generally defeat any threat to human survival, what is more rare is an ending where humans will not continue. Probably the terminal ending is more acceptable in a novel than in a film where theatergoers expect or even demand a happy ending.

Whether *The Road* has a hopeful ending is ambiguous. While the book jacket reviewer claims there is “no hope,” most critics argue for a positive ending, but must justify it with the same strategy of ambiguity that McCarthy creates.

A number of critics perceive a hopeful ending to the ending of *The Road*. Some might see that the ending promises a sort of new Eden since the man who rescues the newly orphaned son has a son and daughter at home. However in a world where birds, fish, and even insects have not survived, this world of an eco-disaster does not exactly permit the hopeful, “cozy catastrophe” of a small group of humans who can rebuild and repopulate (Brian Aldiss about Wyndham) nor of Broderick’s fantasy of agrarian “social harmony” (1).

Clearly, the father’s search for a better life for his son affirms the need for

positive ending, else he would not pursue his quest. Even while dying, the father must teach his son about love and compassion against a brutal and shadowy underworld where most humans are not to be trusted. The many references to Christian symbolism help posit a hopeful ending. Although he suffers from great doubt about his belief in god, the father carries the “fire” (71) of faith, of love, and of hope, especially when he perceives the “boy’s future--glowing...like a tabernacle” (23). Certainly, the man is like Job who was tested by God by asking him to his own human son, like the father agonizing over with the remaining bullet (65). More like God rather than Christ, the man has been struggling with the options between mercy killing and letting his son live a potentially horrible existence so as to redeem humanity at least biologically. At the same time, however, McCarthy complicates religious hope. The father’s trust in his son is counterbalanced by an existential Elijah figure who says, “There is no God and we are his prophets” (149). In this way, the ambiguity or the enigma of Elijah’s proclamation does substantiate one of the basic fears in Post Apocalypse texts, the fear of insanity (Sontag).

Similarly, the son is described in Judeo-Christian imagery. He is ordained as the new conveyer of the “fire” of knowledge and watches over his father’s corpse for the familiar three days. All along, the son has been the center of goodness and of the father’s conscience, where the boy asks to give thanks to people who left them food and has asked to rescue a dog, a lost little boy, and an infant. He shows compassion towards the burnt man (43) even though he later realizes that his mercy towards an outcast (215-7) may kill him instead. At the conclusion of the novel, the son shows he has learned prudence when he interrogates and then trusts the hunter (236).

The ambiguous religious imagery presents a conundrum for interpretation. For instance, Charles (2008) explains rationally that the author's "existential bleakness" is undercut by the imagery of the "Christian-faith apocalypse"; however, the critic also exposes his own ambiguity and lapse into lyricism when he calls the novel a "tender answer to a desperate prayer" (3). Cabon, on the other hand, sees the religious imagery as a useful, strategy that "can go a long way toward mitigating the science-fictional taint" (1) whenever SF texts are seen as marginalized.

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Most critics have trouble with deciding whether the ending is hopeful, and so often resort to ambiguous lyricism. On the one hand, Cleave sees the world as "irredeemably doomed" and insinuates that the "sole hope of the good" might be "grace" "rather than survival" (1). However, Cleave also allows for a positive ending when he interprets the father's reflection about the "unspecified they." McCarthy says this unknown "they" are those "who are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo" and warns that "and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back" (1). Because the critic does not elaborate further about the identity of the "they," whether angels or aliens, Cleave is swallowed by the same metaphysical ambiguity that McCarthy spreads. Ultimately, Cleave suggests that the author has written himself into a conundrum where world annihilation is undone by the paradox of language as a creative activity. Cleave observes that the author negotiated the paradox "almost...in spite of himself, to conclude *The Road* on a note of possible redemption" (4). Clearly, the novel perplexes even the most astute critics.



Still another reviewer negotiates the ending uneasily. Maslin asserts that the author offers no looking forward although allowing the reader to simultaneously “see behind it” (2). She adds that the author’s “final gesture” is the “embrace of faith in the face of no hope whatsoever” (2) and concludes that the novel “offers nothing in the way of escape or comfort,” but does exude “fearless wisdom” (2)-- although what that may be in particular is left up to the reader.

Does the ending lack hope? Perhaps there is no hope for the immediate resurgence of the human species; however, others might find promise in the re-emergence of biological life. Sometimes these terminal narratives end with some bleak anticipation that the human body will in some way contribute biologically to the primordial soup so life can begin again.

McCarthy certainly presents the possibility of the regeneration of life, but not of humans--during the trout images (25, 35, 241). At first, the image is a simple memory of a better world when the father recalls watching “trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (25). However, a few days later, the image takes up a foreboding as when the father sees the trout as “Reflecting back the sun deep in darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (35).

McCarthy ends the novel with the last trout allusion. It now forms an elegy for humanity. He writes,

Once there were brook trout in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current.... On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could

not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (241).

Therefore, this last paragraph strongly suggests that the immediate world “could not be put back,” but that the primitive “wisdom” and “mystery” of nature may repopulate the world. As a colleague once observed, the conclusion may differentiate between “a deeper, richer life” for humans than the mere act human living (Bender email).

One final clue to the impossibility of human survival beyond one or two generations is based upon the bleak and hostile destruction of the immediate environment that seems to preclude vegetation from recovering. Of course, the novel does not hint at pockets of survivors in other parts of the world, so one must generally deduce that these are the last “good” humans. Such a negative ending would be confirmed by the author’s unwillingness to name his characters, neither the hunter and wife who rescue the orphan in the second to last paragraph, nor the father and son on their Everyman journey.

McCarthy has offered several opinions on life. He once offered that living “in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom (Busby 241 quoting McCarthy 31). Additionally, McCarthy made several observations about the novel. At first he answers that *The Road* is “just about a boy and the man on the road,” but adds that readers “can draw conclusions about all sorts of things...depending...on taste” (Conlon 21). The last word then seems to be that McCarthy has written a triple ending, one immediately happy--of a new family, a new generation, and reconciliation, -- but another ending of the inevitable approach of human extinction--, and yet the third scenario, the long-term,

inevitable rebirth of life, not necessarily human. Whatever ending the reader prefers, *The Road* challenges the boundaries of the Post Apocalypse genre-- in preferring character over plot--and counterbalancing horror with lyricism.

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<sup>ii</sup> **Challenge to Themes.** *The Road* transcends the familiar themes of disaster and survival to plumb the universal themes of punishment and mastery.

The novel does include the SF discursive mode of disaster and survival. Although speaking particularly about SF film, Susan Sontag's (1974) and Mick Broderick's (1993) observations about the film genre also ring true for Post Apocalypse novels. In part, Sontag explains that modern anxiety is the basis of the disaster theme whereas Broderick examines the genre as an appeal to the survival instinct. Applicable to *The Road*, Sontag's ideas are that human anxiety can be seen in such themes as human fears of becoming alien food (46), of individual and collective deaths (47), and of insanity (49).

Broderick not only rejects Sontag's disaster theme, but also views the dominant discursive mode of Post-Apocalypse texts as concerned with survival that simultaneously reinforces patriarchal law and provides a fantasy of agrarian "social harmony" (1). Clearly, *The Road* tends to support the patriarchy in the bands of cannibal roadrats, but also questions the total authority during the interchanges of the father and son who make communal decisions; moreover, this is no depiction of "social harmony" unless one finds faith in the ending. More important, under Broderick's classification, *The Road* falls into the category of "Experiencing Nuclear War and its Immediate Effects (10) which includes the holocaust as a "lived" event where the narrative includes the man's reflections upon the "before" for contrast (10); where the world suffers a "total ecocide," Nuclear Winter, and genocide (12). Alternately, Cleave slates *The Road* into the horror genre, with the attendant tropes of journey through a charnel house and fear of death, but also from a more personal level: the fears of dying before the child had become an adult and of deciding whether murdering the child is essential to prevent other horrors (6).

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### **Challenge to reader appeals**

At the very least, *The Road* captures wider audiences than the conventional SF readers. It appeals to various readers by postulating how humans might survive through the well-worn theme of resourcefulness. Clearly, the scenario of depopulation brings about readers' sense of new beginnings and discovery. The appeal of a new frontier may elicit some sort of hope or promise of an improved civilization or culture (Adams 1-2). Individually, the reader must harbor the deep-seated conviction that he or she will survive through some sort of mastery, whether by physical strength, moral courage, intellectual acuity, or and resourcefulness. At the same time, readers may experience a sense of mastery, the confidence that comes with planning ahead and meeting challenges. The genre appeals to the young, to the experienced, to the skilled, and to those readers who might wonder in what forms institutions might arise again, such religion, economics, law, political systems, or even socio-cultural arrangements. Clearly, the more invested readers are likely the ones that have more to prove or to lose.

<sup>ii</sup> At least one critic has redefined the genre as "Apocalypse" instead of "Holocaust," retaining the word for genocide cases whereas other critics prefer "Armageddon," which seems to imply some religious context. PA differs from the Utopian-Dystopian universe because humans deliberately create utopias that generally revert to dystopias.

### **Challenge to plot**

It is appropriate that the first great quest in Western literature and *The Road* are bookends to these fictional civilizations. Some plot events also suggest scenes from the Greek classic. For instance, the narrator mistrusts pleasant dreams as "siren worlds" (15) that seduce him from his determined task to save his son. In an ironic reversal, the pair descends into an underworld of a survival shelter that resembles a heaven to a world turned upside down. Even the omnipresent threat of cannibalism recalls Odysseus' events such as the Cyclops episode since the "road rat" cannibal has deeply sunk eyes that appear "like an animal inside" (53) and when shot, has a "the hole in his forehead" (56).