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Survival in an Uninhabitable Place: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Degree in English Studies

Faculty of Arts

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Academic Year: 2019-2020

Abstract

Literature and art have always been reflections of the reality of each era. By analysing them we can become acquainted with the socio-political circumstances of the time, or even explore the concerns and fears of the population. Cormac McCarthy's last novel *The Road* portrays a post-apocalyptic world where all flora and fauna have been blown to smithereens, and the few remaining survivors follow a road longing for a better future. The American author describes an uninhabitable grey world with clear dystopian features, building a novel that could be considered to be a critique towards the current environmental issue, and even as a warning. Overall, I will focus on the role of place and nature in a post-apocalyptic society, analysing their interaction with human relationships and moral values. In order to understand all the factors that influence the survival of the main characters in the novel, I will follow three different methodologies. Firstly, I will analyse the novel as a dystopian story through Utopian Studies, highlighting McCarthy's use of place to create a dystopian atmosphere. Thus, I will make use of an eco-critical approach in order to analyse the absence of nature and its consequences in human behaviour. Thirdly, focusing on a more social aspect, I will examine the cultural symbolism of such elements as the road or the myth of the American West, and the contrast between the human values of the two main characters. In summary, through this paper I will conduct an analysis on how McCarthy reflects current socio-political and environmental concerns through a touching story in which a devastated landscape leads to a behavioural shift, emphasising the role of nature and place.

Keywords: dystopia, survival, *The Road*, environment, American West

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1. Introduction

It could be argued that literature and art are a reflection of society at every historical period. Individuals tend to express our fears and concerns through different media. Nowadays, in a world where the domination of brutal capitalism prevails, humans lean towards individualism and the environment constantly shouts its need for help, a dystopian or apocalyptic approach would be an accurate portrayal of our values and possible fears. These days, social issues are brought to the foreground, and I would say that movements that fight against racism, sexism and classism, in favour of human rights, overall, have gained momentum. Artistic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, inspired by African-Americans within their socio-political movement, have demonstrated how literature and art are mirrors of society. This example also reflects the power these pieces of art may have in order to influence individuals, by spreading certain ideas or values.

Even if we consider racism and sexism, for instance, dominant problems of our society, the emerging global environmental crisis is said to be the main concern of the 21st century. We are facing an irreversible deterioration of our planet, provoked by our capitalist system, which, while making apology for progress, destroys and pollutes habitats, annihilates numerous species and exhausts natural resources. In the same way, the living conditions of human and non-human beings are swiftly deteriorating. Thus, an uncertain and not very optimistic future holds for our planet and for us. As a result of this environmental emergency, the magnitude of ecological awareness has increased significantly in the last decade, which has also been reflected in literature.

As aforementioned, dystopias would be in line with the social and environmental concerns of society, since this literary subgenre of fiction usually portrays a wrecked society where dehumanization, tyranny and suffering predominate, often due to an environmental disaster. In this paper I will explore more in depth dystopias and their main features, focusing on an outstanding example of this literary genre: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

This novel is considered to be one of the most relevant environmental works of the 21st century. However, its classification among the different literary sub-genres is not easy, because, as I will below explain, this work could be interpreted in many different ways. Overall, I believe that this novel has features deriving from two main literary genres: dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction. Dystopian features such as the depiction of a dark future and socio-political criticism are present in the novel. On the other hand, the scenario in which a civilization has already collapsed and the characters are struggling to survive evokes post-apocalyptic fiction works. In spite of their slight differences, I will use both terms to refer to the 2006 novel along the paper, since I believe that both currents flow into *The Road*. Yet, this analysis of McCarthy's novel will be conducted within a more general dystopian framework, because I regard the dystopian environment of this book as one of its most meaningful and successful features.

In this paper I will examine McCarthy's novel with a particular emphasis on the issue of survival. The main challenge that the characters of *The Road* have to face is staying alive. The devastated environment and terrible living conditions affect their physical conditions, their values, actions and impulses and how they interact with other individuals. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to show that in a dystopian environment, survival does not only depend on the individuals' strength, but it is also conditioned by external forces. In order to support this idea, although the general theoretical framework will be Utopian Studies, I will also utilize two particular critical approaches. On the one hand, I will analyse how the interaction with the inanimate nature and other living beings affect the characters, following an ecocritical perspective. On the other hand, I will explore the human relations and the influence of American socio-cultural values (such as the myth of the West) on the novel, from a cultural studies approach.

In the following lines I will make a general review of McCarthy's career and I will explain the reasons for classifying his last work as a dystopian novel. Moving into a deeper analysis, I will look at the influence of setting, both the environment and the symbol of the road. Moreover, I will discuss the similarities and differences between McCarthy's novel and the original myth of the West and the idea of the American

Dream. Finally, I will examine the alteration of human values and behaviour in the extreme conditions McCarthy describes, and I will complete the paper with a conclusion.

2. Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy's life has always been a mystery, due to his reluctance to grant interviews. According to Richard B. Woodward's 1992 article in *The New York Times*, "McCarthy's silence about himself has spawned a host of legends about his background and whereabouts". However, this intrigue also gives some power to his figure. As Woodward states, McCarthy's biography could be summarized as we may read in the author's note to his first novel *The Orchard Keeper*:

[H]e was born in Rhode Island in 1933; grew up outside Knoxville; attended parochial schools; entered the University of Tennessee, which he dropped out of; joined the Air Force in 1953 for four years; returned to the university, which he dropped out of again, and began to write novels in 1959. Add the publication dates of his books and awards, the marriages and divorces, a son born in 1962 and the move to the Southwest in 1974, and the relevant facts of his biography are complete.

I want to remark that, subsisting on the awards money and the grants he was provided with, McCarthy lived in different US cities which influenced many of his works, since "[he] doesn't write about places he hasn't visited" (Woodward). His first novels *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1974) were written while he lived in Tennessee. After he separated from his second wife Annie DeLisle in 1976, he moved to El Paso, Texas, where he lived for many years, and published *Suttree* (1979). Woodward recalls DeLisle's words: "He always thought he would write the great American western", since McCarthy always claimed to be interested in the Southwest: "There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West" (McCarthy, cited in Woodward). Corresponding to these ideas, McCarthy wrote *Blood Meridian* (1985), an apocalyptic Western set in Texas and Mexico during the 1840s and based on actual historical events, for which he had to carry deep research and even learned Spanish, as Marty Priola maintains. This novel is considered to be a turning point in his career, since it was the first example of the Western writing he will further develop with *The Border Trilogy*.

These novels were the most successful ones theretofore: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998).

In the first years of the new millennium, he published *No Country for Old Men* (2005), a novel that was later on adapted into a prizewinning crime thriller film directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. In 2006, the Pulitzer Prize for Literature winner *The Road* was published, which has also been brought to the big screen by John Hillcoat. As McCarthy himself verified, this novel was inspired by a journey in which he visited El Paso with his son John Francis, and began to imagine the city in a hundred years' time. In contrast to the aforementioned novels, *The Road* breaks with geographical links, due to its universality, achieved through the lack of details regarding the setting. That is, in the novel the reader does not specifically know where the characters are; the descriptions of the environment do not provide any clue, and the only information that is given in this respect is that the duo is heading south, in search for better weather conditions. This idea mirrors the myth of the West: the idea of the road which leads towards a better future. Therefore, I claim that this novel is somehow related to Western stories, and that despite its universality, McCarthy's Western influences are present in his work, as I will explain later on.

Overall McCarthy's works are linked to Southern Gothic, Western and post-apocalyptic imagery. His first five novels are "marked by intense natural observation, a kind of morbid realism" (Woodward), where the characters are outcasts who cowboy-like travel through wilderness, facing adversities. Woodward claims that being a "rightful heir to the Southern Gothic tradition, McCarthy is a radical conservative who still believes that the novel can, in his words, 'encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity'". As I will analyse in this paper, *The Road* elevates all the socio-political implications present in his prior works, adding a relevant environmentalist perspective that perfectly fits the current social concerns. Serban Dan Blidariu (53) mentions that Harold Bloom considered *Blood Meridian* to be the "authentic American apocalyptic novel". Moreover, even if "[t]he devastated landscape has been a central part of more than one of McCarthy's novels", "in *The Road* this image is reasserted more powerfully than ever before" (Cant 186, cited in Blidariu 53). Because of this, a con-

temporary approach towards the novel permits a wider comprehension of the implications and topicality of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic work.

If I analysed McCarthy's works taking into account the dystopian theory I have previously mentioned, I could state that some of his works are in a way related to the roots of dystopian literature. Even if his works reflect some of the utopian values, he in a way deconstructs these utopian ideas, converting his novels into dystopias. Some of them have more characteristic features such as *The Road*, which portrays a post-apocalyptic world and lifestyle; whereas others, such as *All The Pretty Horses*, break with the utopian depiction of the myth of the West, providing an alternative, which may not be considered dystopian at all, but is clearly not-utopian.

3. Dystopian Literature

The Road has been often regarded as a dystopian novel. Some scholars such as Blidariu claim that "the novel does not conform to the classical dystopian model", since "it bears resemblance more to a psychological novel than one with a political subtext like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (55). Nonetheless, *The Road* portrays a good example of a dystopian environment. Inger-Anne Søfting, on the other hand, remarks that the contrasting discourse of the novel contains elements both of utopia and dystopia. "[T]he psychological inner life of the characters, constitutes a utopian element", while the "[e]xternal space, the natural physical world, constitutes a strong dystopian element" (704). In order to further explore this categorization, it is worth defining and analysing the main features of this literary genre.

According to Douglas Harper's etymological dictionary, dystopia means "bad or abnormal place"; resulting from the merge of the Ancient Greek prefix "dys" (bad) and the word "topos" (place). In March 12, 1868, when John Stuart Mill used this term in one of his speeches to describe something "too bad to be practicable", in contrast to "what is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable", he converted them into antonyms. Thus, dystopias could be considered to be the opposite of utopias, which etymologically means "good place", developing from the Ancient Greek

prefix “eu” (Harper). However, the meaning of the latter prefix is different if we look at the term defined by Sir Thomas More, the author of the 1516 work *Utopia*. In this case, “the word Utopia (...) means nowhere and implies nothing relevant to the quality of nowhere. It could be good or bad”, since “‘u’ is the equivalent of ‘ou’, meaning no or not” (Tower Sargen 137).

Centuries after the use of these terms for the first time, I would state that, overall, in current culture and literature, utopias and dystopias could be encapsulated as the representatives of the values of good and bad, respectively. Today, utopias would represent ideal non-existing societies, “where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community” (Suvin, cited in Claeys 135). However, according to Gregory Claeys, the utopian ideals are “susceptible to dystopian failure, both economically and environmentally” (109). Taking this into account, it could be said that utopian literature has not been very prominent in the last centuries, “in spite of the very inspiring critical works of thinkers such as Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) and Karl Mannheim (1893-1947)”, and that it was dystopian literature and its gloomy images of the future the ones that succeeded, mostly in the 20th century (Claeys 21).

The image that the term ‘dystopia’ brings to our minds has been developing thanks to different works. I will briefly present the most relevant examples of dystopian literature, looking at their common features. The following works match the definition which expresses that dystopias are mainly critical of the fictional societies they reflect, societies in which negative sociopolitical developments have arisen (Claeys 107). In short, “ways of life we must be sure to avoid” (B.F. Skinner, cited in Claeys 108).

Claeys states that the first theoretical dystopian instances emerge as a response to the ideas of the French Revolution, in what he refers to “the first dystopian turn” (111). The development that began with the 18th century fictional works, influenced by the Enlightenment ideas and developments in science, reached the summit with the birth of the science-fiction genre by the hand of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Shelley’s work can be considered a “satire on the failed aspirations of the Revolution, her-

alding one of the key themes of late dystopian writings” (Claeys 111). The scientific and technological influences became an important ingredient in subsequent dystopian works, which will normally portray imaginary societies set in the future. From the 1820s, “utopian thought in both Europe and North America had been strongly affected by Owenism, Fourierism and Saint-Simonism¹” (Claeys 115). But the following development of eugenics and socialism influenced an outstanding turn towards dystopia in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century, mostly in Britain, becoming a predominant expression which mirrored the failures of totalitarian regimes (Claeys 108, 115). Within this second dystopian turn we find H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) which are some of the most representative examples of dystopian literature.

Apart from these pillar works, and moving closer to the novel I am analysing in this paper, I maintain that the 20th and 21st century US literature has also brought many dystopian treasures, such as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Robert Rimmer’s *The Harrad Experiment* (1966), Ira Levin’s *This Perfect Day* (1970), Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) or the most recent dystopian best-seller: Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Claeys 132).

Most of these novels portray futuristic societies where totalitarian states control the masses of obedient citizens in a technologically advanced environment, often linked to the destruction of nature. Some of them, such as Orwell’s or Huxley’s, provide a more political approach, while Callenbach’s, for instance, could be closer to an environmentalist critique, like *The Road*. Thus, dystopias in a way reflect the various weaknesses and fears of present society; a society that constantly aims for a better future (a utopia). This endless search for a perfect life is in a way linked to the American myth of the West, as I will further analyse in this essay.

¹Owenism, Fourierism and Saint-Simonism were three utopian socialist philosophical movements, originated in Europe in the 19th century, which were based on the ideas of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and Claude Henri de Rouvroy, (comte de Saint-Simon) respectively.

Having quickly reviewed the history of dystopias, I would like to underline the relevance of this genre in current society. Unfortunately, the irreversible deterioration of our planet due to global warming, and the decline of empathic human values lead us towards a pessimistic vision of the future. As I have mentioned before, art is a faithful reflection of the ideas of each epoch, and the fear that invades our minds can be seen in contemporary literature. The constant feeling of governmental and technological control over our lives, the consumption of superficial entertainment and culture and its consequent alienation, natural disasters, continuous wars (both physical and cold wars) and the lack of empathy and growth of individualist interests are just some of the symptoms that anticipate the peak of the disease which is gradually destroying everything the Earth embraces. Even if these problems are present, it seems we do not care about the future (and that is reflected in the lack of political action), and thus, we do not contemplate the difficulties we would have to face in order to survive in a hypothetical apocalyptic environment. That is, apart from a few cases in which people, anticipating a future disaster, build bunkers and study survival techniques, most people would not know how to satiate their needs in order to survive in a different setting.

This is the issue McCarthy presents in his novel *The Road*. The two main characters, the father and the boy, travel across a carefully described devastated grey landscape which is part of a terrifying bare world, where almost all plants, animals and humans are dead. This dystopian setting is the result of an unknown catastrophe, even if we may guess this landscape is a consequence of the current global situation. The fatal fate also threatens the characters, who travel towards the south coast following the road, aiming to survive the harsh winter. This endless and uphill way is emphasized by the slow rhythm of McCarthy's prose, together with the crudity of his dialogues. The image of the wrecked world and the dream of a better future are merged by the need for survival. That is, the characters have to adapt to the new conditions in order to stay alive. Therefore, I could state that the struggle to survive is the axis of the novel; a struggle which is influenced by various factors, as I will later analyse.

4. *The Road*: Fight for Survival in a Dystopian World

The Road could be analysed focusing on different outstanding topics such as borders and crossings, the role of religion, morality and ethics, aesthetic symbolism of colours and different elements such as dust, to name just a few possible critical approaches. A purely ecocritical approach, or even an analysis of the patriarchal perspective in the novel would be feasible. Nonetheless, in this case I will be focusing on the issue of survival and the influence of external forces, both environmental and social, in a dystopian context.

Blidariu (64) claims that when nature deteriorates, humanity does equally. That is, a dystopian environment leads to a dystopian behaviour, since humans cannot be understood away from the environment. Fahmi Leksono explains, using Dreese's words (2-3), that environmental factors play a crucial role in physical, emotional and even spiritual configurations that determine the ideas of who we are. *The Road* is from the beginning set in a devastated environment where there is no place for hope: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more grey each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (McCarthy 3). The grey landscape accompanies the characters throughout the route, until they reach the grey beach: "Cold. Desolate. Birdless", which the father laments is not blue (McCarthy 215).

As I have previously mentioned, this novel might not fulfil the description of a dystopia in the classical sense that, for instance, Orwell's dystopian political implications fulfil. However, as Blidariu asserts, "[a] barren and unproductive land can be a cause for a dystopia even outside of an oppressive political system" (54). Moreover, the dystopian genre is more related to the presentation of a world "where hope is almost extinguished regardless of the political or natural cause of the situation" (Blidariu 55). Thus, in the case of *The Road*, it is the devastated environment which builds a feeling of hopelessness in an anarchical society, remaining faithful to the original definition of dystopia as "bad place".

In a chaotic context in which both non-living natural elements and living beings have been affected by an unknown disaster, the life purpose changes. The catastrophe "places humans in an unwanted position where basic life conditions are rare and hard to

find” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 37). The world is not what it was before the cataclysm; now everything that mattered is destroyed: there is no government, no economy, no jobs, no money, just “[d]ust and ash everywhere” (McCarthy 7). Therefore, the only reason why the remaining individuals wake up every day is for the sake of self-preservation: the American Dream is over.

4. 1. From Utopia to Dystopia: the Decline of the American Dream

“Hopes for the better and fears for the worst have always been connected to dreams and nightmares. Utopian authors have chosen to focus on the first while dystopian authors have chosen to focus on the latter” (Blidariu 56). Some of these utopian ideas have been institutionalized, becoming part of popular culture; for instance, the myth of the West along with the concept of the American Dream would be the ideal representation of a utopia.

On the 4th of July 1776, the US Declaration of Independence was proclaimed. This document secures the bases of the American Dream: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (National Archives). According to this, hard work can provide the fulfilment of the individual desires and ambitions in America, regardless of the race, class, gender or nationality of the individuals. Thus, the Founding Fathers motivated a constant search for a better life, which was climactic in the 1920s. During this time, nevertheless, it can be seen that the Dream was not equal for everybody: “the American Dream is like a double-edged sword” (Blidariu 56).

Literary works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) or John Steinbeck’s 1937 novella *Of Mice and Men*, demonstrate that there are many factors that influence the pursuit of happiness. Even if I see a similar symbolism of hope in Fitzgerald’s and McCarthy’s novels, represented by Gatsby’s ‘green light’ and ‘the fire’ in *The Road*, the Dream of the father and son could be closer to the one George and Lennie pursue in Steinbeck’s novel: obtaining freedom and independence and buying their own

farm. However, as I have previously mentioned, the dystopian environment that surrounds the two survivors exhausts the last glimmers of hope. In a post-apocalyptic scenario where “nothing can be produced anymore, [and] the purpose of having a job becomes obsolete”, the conventional American Dream disappears (Blidariu 57). In this context “a house of one’s own can no longer be associated with achievement and stability” (Blidariu 56) as in *Of Mice and Men*. That is, McCarthy does not portray the traditional American Dream, but its decline. Furthermore, Blidariu (56) claims that John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is a relevant work which deals with the collapse of the Dream, and that according to Susan Kollin, *The Road* is the “apocalyptic revision” of Steinbeck’s novel.

Blidariu defends that “the American Dream is not essential to human civilization”, nonetheless, “its absence seems such a shock” (57). The individuals that live in the anarchic society portrayed on *The Road* are confused because they do not have a long-term life purpose anymore, they have no Dream. Despite the decline of this Dream, the father and son, driven by their survival instinct, lead towards the south following the road, longing for a better future. This demonstrates that, even if they pursue broken and unachievable dreams, hope must be maintained.

The journey that is described in *The Road* mirrors the imagery of the myth of the American West, which is very present in McCarthy’s previous novels such as *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*. In previous eras, cowboys and gold diggers, among others, traveled westwards towards the land of opportunities, following a road, symbol of change and progress. The way to the West was hard: they had to cross barren lands and overcome several hardships. In the 2006 novel, the father and son do similarly. As Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz admits, “[o]ne could even argue that this is a ‘reversed story’ of the conquest of the American West since, like the earlier pioneers, these two characters face an inhospitable land and all kinds of cruel enemies” (2). Yet in this case, instead of heading West, their aim is to reach the south coast in order to survive the winter; thus the south becomes their land of opportunities. The characters follow a road, which is the axis of the novel, and is one of the few remains of the pre-apocalyptic world. The landscapes they go through are even more lifeless than the deserts cowboys

used to travel by: “Barren, silent, godless” (McCarthy 4). Moreover, survival is more challenging in this case: they do not only have to face the poisonous natural conditions, but they also have to fight against “the bad guys” and their own inner fears.

On the other hand, taking into account Don D. Walker’s description and analysis regarding the Western hero, I observe that *The Road* resembles the Western frontier more than what it may seem at first sight. Walker presents a darker side of the myth of the West, claiming that “nowhere in all time and all space was man more free than he was on the Western frontier; but nowhere in all time and all space was he more lonely and more doomed to violent death” (382). Similarly, in the post-apocalyptic scenario, the father and son are free, that is, they do not have any restrictions, duties or laws to follow. Yet, as those cowboys who embodied freedom and wilderness, their life is also “hard and full of exposure” (Walker 382). The frontier hero is preoccupied with death despite his freedom: “[h]e fears freezing, starvation and tongue-swelling thirst. He is always alert against Indians, grizzly bears, and the trampling hoofs of stampeding cattle” (Walker 383). The survivors of *The Road* are threatened by different perils, however they are equally fated to die if they do not learn how to stay safe. Concerning individual freedom, Walker (384) emphasizes that destiny limits this liberty: “[i]n nature, destiny has the character of necessity” while in man “freedom and destiny limit each other, for he has finite freedom” (Tillich, cited in Walker 384). In the case of the 2006 novel, the inevitable lethal destiny means that the freedom of the characters is finite; they are slaves to fate.

Ergo, as Ibarrola-Armendariz remarks, it is noticeable that “the American West is still very much present in [McCarthy’s] art” (12). In spite of the similarities, “one could even read [*The Road*] as the culmination of his legacy of re-mythologizing the American West” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 12). Therefore, as aforementioned, the myth of the West would represent a utopian journey that follows a hopeful wish, while the dystopian one McCarthy narrates responds to a need: the necessity to survive.

4.2. The Road as a Way Out

The destruction of the environment causes a “behavioral mutation” in the characters, since they have no alternative but to follow the road. Thence, Kollin (157) considers this novel to be “a narrative that is part ecodystopian fiction and part American road novel” (cited in Blidariu 60). Thus, McCarthy not only emphasizes the devastated nature, but also the symbol of the road that leads the characters towards their objective. I claim that McCarty makes an ironic use of the concept of the road, since, in contrast to the adventurous journeys that the myth of the West represents, the characters of the novel do not consider this element to be their liberator. They have no joy of traveling, they have not chosen to leave their home, they have no place to return to. They can only follow the road, hoping to find a better place; it is their way out. The novel begins and ends on the road, and the narration is centered on the path, which seems endless. The road is a constant element in the story, and creates a feeling of continuity of a long lasting and hard journey, which is emphasized by the formal characteristics of the novel. The plainness and crudity of the dialogues, the lack of chapters and the use of polysyndeton match the tone of the story: they slow down the reading, symbolizing the rhythm in which the protagonists move, highlighting their suffering, deterioration and weakness.

Along the road, father and son are kept motivated thanks to the idea that they will reach the south coast. Their main aim, however, is not to build a new life in the southern coast, since they cannot afford to think of long term purposes: there are “[n]o lists of things to be done. (...) There is no later. This is later” (McCarthy 54). Their empty dream is limited to surviving the day, they cannot think ahead, and they cannot look into the past either, since everything they knew is now destroyed.

Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be? (McCarthy 53-54)

After expressing these words, the father whispers to his son: “I have you”. Surrounded by darkness, and threatened by a fatal fate, the son rekindles the fire of hope in the father’s heart. His wife lamented her only hope was “for eternal nothingness” (McCarthy 57). Despite her warnings and tragic death, the father made the decision to stay alive, devoting his remaining days to save his son, as he knows he himself will soon die due to his illness, provoked by the extremely polluted air. Therefore, the boy could be considered to be the personification of hope in the story. McCarthy wants to emphasize the fact that even in a dead-end world in which every inch is irredeemably destroyed, and having embraced their despairing reality, there is no place for redemption, which is a valiant decision: “What's the bravest thing you ever did? / He spat into the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said” (McCarthy 272). The complexity of the inner feelings of the characters, who contradictorily feel hope and despair, contrasts with the void of the environment, which is the source of their problems.

During the journey, grimness provokes the characters to ponder on their values, even considering the idea of death: “Do you wish you would die? / No. But I might wish I had died” (McCarthy 169). All the survivors prefer they would not have to live in a devastated world, ergo, they wish they died before the cataclysm. Yet they are alive, thus their instinct urges them to survive: “Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” (McCarthy 169). Contradictions arise again: they are hopeful they will survive and reach the south, yet at the same time they know the life that awaits them is not worth all the suffering. In these circumstances, suicide is occasionally idealized, referred to as a salvation, as a privilege; not as a dark ending, but as a relief from a cruel life. The father even teaches his son how to kill himself in the case he is captured by “the bad guys”:

He took the boy's hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered. Take it. The boy was terrified. He put his arm around him and held him. His body so thin. Don't be afraid, he said. If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand?

I think so.

No. Do you understand?

Yes.

Say yes I do Papa.

Yes I do Papa.

He looked down at him. All he saw was terror. He took the gun from him. No you don't, he said.

I don't know what to do, Papa. I don't know what to do. (McCarthy 112-113)

This scene is an instance of the learning process the man and the boy go through during their journey. Along the novel the reader can notice that, due the difficulties of the way, both protagonists embody a personal development in which they ponder the value of life. Nevertheless, I believe that the road does not equally influence the characters. On the one hand, I would assert that for the father, the road is a hopeless and inevitable way towards death. Therefore, his development is more related to a spiritual awareness, which will permit him to die in peace once he fulfills his objective of leading his beloved son to a safer place in the south. He is, from the beginning, conscious of the gravity of his illness, and at the end, McCarthy describes: "Coughing. He bent over, holding his knees. Taste of blood. The slow surf crawled and seethed in the dark and he thought about his life but there was no life to think about and after a while he walked back." (154). For the son, on the other hand, there is still a life to think about. Hence, I could uphold that the adventures they live on the road are a source of knowledge. Likewise, his personal development could be compared to rites of passage. In other words, the road is a watershed in the boy's life: he is learning how to survive, how to take responsibility for his actions, and how to morally judge the good and the bad. In the end, after his father passes away, he is obliged to accept his loneliness and to keep going. Despite his young age, he is unintentionally forced to comply with adult responsibilities, adapting to the social circumstances. Regarding this idea, I even consider *The Road* to be a *Bildungsroman* ('education novel' or 'coming-of-age story'), since, even if the psychological and moral growth is not the axis of the story, it is inarguable that the characters, specially the boy, experience an inner change.

The need for mobility in the novel is not motivated by an individual wish for personal development and growth as it could be the case of the adventurers of the classical myth of the West. Nevertheless, the extreme circumstances do not only have an impact on their physical condition, but also in their minds. Among these extreme cir-

cumstances, apart from the remains from the old world, such as the road, McCarthy emphasizes the relevance of the absent environmental elements in the novel.

5. The Enemy from an Ecocritical Perspective: Landscape as a Character

The Road is, according to many critics, linked to the current environmental crisis. For instance, George Monbiot praised this work as “the most important environmental book ever written” in his column in *The Guardian*, in October 2007. This is why the analysis of this survival narrative is often conducted from an ecocritical perspective. Ecocriticism, a relatively young movement, studies the relationship between literature and culture and the physical environment, bringing the environmental issue to the foreground. As I have previously mentioned, literature and art are mirrors of society, and thus, the current environmental crisis is one of the issues that is present in many authors’ works. The Rhode Island-born writer presents this post-apocalyptic work, giving rise to various questions about our responsibilities and the future of our planet. I could state that, in a way, McCarthy responds to contemporary concerns and anxieties, and that is why this novel has had a remarkable cultural and social impact. Indeed, Blidariu observes that, even if it is a work of fiction, “it can be taken as a warning. And [in fact,] it has” (64).

Despite the novel’s clear environmental implications, there are some other scholars who deny linking this novel to the global warming issue, since the causes of the cataclysm are not clearly specified. This is the only description that McCarthy provides:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?

I dont know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not.

Once in those early years he'd wakened in a barren wood and lay listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark. Their half muted crankings miles above where they circled the earth as senselessly as insects trooping the rim of a bowl. He wished them godspeed till they were gone. He never heard them again. (52-53)

Taking into account that *The Road* is a contemporary novel, I believe that the brutal capitalism, advancement of technology and the growth of individualism and detachment from nature could have inspired McCarthy to think about the cause of the disaster. Hence, among the academics who have attempted to identify the causes of the disaster, various theories arise. Some mention asteroid strikes, others a divine apocalypse; yet there are two theories that prevail. Firstly, there is a majority of critics who claim that “the novel is set in a post-war nuclear winter” (Gifford 50). Kenneth Lincoln and Ibarrola-Armendariz would be two representatives who support this view. In fact, Ibarrola-Armendariz considers that the following signs unequivocally direct the reader towards a post-nuclear scenario: “charred woods, floating ash everywhere, desolate cities, polluted rivers, and a few gangs of marauders” (84). Secondly, Terry Gifford (50) mentions that “critics such as James Wood want to believe that [*The Road*] is a novel about climate change”.

On the other hand, some experts claim that the cause lacks importance, since knowing the cause should not affect the perception regarding the development of the novel. In a 2009 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, McCarthy himself recounted: “I don’t have an opinion. It could be anything —volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?” (cited in Boukhalfa & Ghersallah 17). Ergo, McCarthy invites an open interpretation regarding the cause, focusing on the issue of survival and the effects the new environment has on the characters’ behaviour.

I have previously mentioned how significant the setting is in McCarthy’s work. In previous novels, place is presented as a force that shapes the protagonists’ moral dimension. Gifford (50) maintains that the characters’ individual nature is contrasted to the non-living environment in order to judge the adaptation abilities; i.e. their survival skills. In *The Road*, the author’s bond with place becomes extraordinary. In this case,

the universality of the novel does not link the characters to any particular place, but only to a denatured environment. We should remember that it is due to the hopeless and lifeless surroundings that this novel is considered to be a dystopian work. In Gifford's words, *The Road* is "a novel without nature" (49). Indeed, as he emphasizes, the reading of the novel is shocking because the reader slowly realizes about all the elements that are absent along the story: on the one hand the "aesthetic of Nature", and on the other hand "any firm evidence of causality" (Gifford 49). Thus, I believe that McCarthy wants to highlight the relevance of the elements that are absent.

Besides, the reader realizes that the novel will not provide the information about the cause of the disaster. This lack of information urges the reader to ponder about the causes and seek for clues. Since "it seems likely that we are being encouraged to think of this as having a human cause" (Gifford 50), the novel may fulfil the goal of raising awareness about our actions' implications and responsibilities.

The landscape that McCarthy describes is equally quiet and terrifying. The void and silence are signs of a devastated environment in which the few survivors' loneliness is accentuated. The surroundings are predominantly static, as the natural cycle has stopped together with the death of the majority of fauna and flora. The few material remains (wrecked houses and cars) draw a bleak landscape, merging with the corpses of the people who died since the cataclysm. McCarthy evokes: "The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed palings of their teeth." (24). Despite the obvious lifelessness of nature, it is irrefutable that this element has a metaphysical force which actively affects human behaviour. In other words, if what is around us suddenly changes, even if this mutation results in its death, our life as a whole does not remain stable.

On the one hand, the novel reflects how the destruction of nature conditions the physical health of the individuals, particularly the father's. The cataclysm released toxic waste and extinguished the flora which have the function of purifying the air. Along the novel the reader realizes that pollution is the source of the father's respiratory disease,

and the responsible for transforming snow into “pale gray flakes” (McCarthy 93). Additionally, the psychological aspect is altered, exhibiting the rawest human instincts. As Blidariu observes, “[w]hen nature turned to the worse, so did man” (64). Therefore, I claim that, as a consequence to the environmental shift after which “nature cannot sustain itself and even life seems to have outlived its usefulness” (Blidariu 62), moral dilemmas arise. Moreover, I state that the decay of humanity originated in the environmental disaster, because political and social changes were also consequences of the first alteration; i.e. humans are unable to live without an appropriate environment.

Homo Sapiens are social beings that have the necessity not only to interact with other living beings, but also with the non-living nature. Gifford (59) affirms humans and more-than-humans are “inextricably interdependent”, thus, the devastated environment McCarthy narrates equally damages them. Besides, even if the anthropocentric ideas give us credence to believe we are superior and we would exceptionally survive in drastic circumstances, humans are mere living organisms. Consequently, the extinction of all flora and fauna would inevitably cause our downfall too. In relation to this idea, Gifford presents Edward O. Wilson’s 1984 theory of “biophilia” (55). According to Wilson, human beings need to be close to “organic life forms” and “bond with them”, as they have a positive feeling towards their natural surroundings. McCarthy’s narration, which centres on the absent elements, highlights the necessity for a world in which nature and life prevail. The “[b]arren, silent, godless” (4) scenario, starring a road surrounded by “dead trees” (4) and “old crops dead and flattened” (21); a world in which everything is “covered with ash and dust” (12), the characters’ lungs are filled with “grainy air” (20) and there is, overall, “[n]o sign of life” (21). McCarthy reverses what an ideal environment would look like, opting for a dystopian setting. Hence, I think that the American writer symbolizes Wilson’s theory in a metaphorical way, remarking the fundamental need of “biophilia”.

As I have analysed, the natural conditions have an influence on the characters behaviour. The contrast between the old world (before the cataclysm) and the new world and the implications of each circumstance are reflected in the character of the man. He is the unifying thread between the past and the present, so the reader learns about the

old world through his nostalgic memories. Unlike the boy, he is aware of the magnitude of the present situation, and recognises that the decay of society is directly linked to the deterioration of the environment.

6. Morality and Human Values: the Old World vs. the New World

The 21st century might be considered a century of development in many aspects. Technological and scientific advancements, for instance, are highly improving human lifestyle. However, the capitalist system forces us to follow an accelerated rhythm which could have more disadvantages than advantages in the long run. Problems such as pollution, exhaustion of natural resources and nuclear wars are, among others, menaces that can be highly inspirational for writers such as McCarthy, since they lay the foundations for a hypothetical world-collapse. The dystopian setting that the Rhode Island-born writer presents is not that improbable as it may seem. Nowadays there are people who, led by the fears of possible nuclear wars or natural disasters, build bunkers in which they stockpile food and resources in order to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. This can also be seen in *The Road*, when father and son find a bunker which McCarthy depicts as an oasis in the desert:

Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead in his hand. Oh my God, he said. He looked back at the boy. It's all right, he said. Come down.

Papa?

Come down. Come down and see.

He stood the lamp on the step and went up and took the boy by the hand. Come on, he said. It's all right.

What did you find?

I found everything. Everything.

(McCarthy 138-139)

As the father explains, all those goods were there “because someone thought [they] might be needed” (McCarthy 139). Thus, I would uphold that this novel is not

only a post-apocalyptic fiction work, but also a warning of the possible consequences of current human impact on the Earth.

Apart from the environment, human values have also gone through a development for the worse throughout history. Anthropocentrism, a belief that places human beings in the centre of the universe, has been present from the beginning of humanity. This human supremacy might be considered one of the main problems regarding environmental deterioration, since this self-given power is used to justify the oppression and domination over other living species. In this case, *The Road* presents a world in which humans are left isolated, and thus have unlimited power. However, this power is meaningless in a bare world. This novel demonstrates humans are not the most important beings, since they cannot live without the presence of all the natural elements that are absent. The symbiotic relationship between the environment and humans is the source of our survival. Hence, I believe that McCarthy invalidates the anthropocentric theory, emphasising the relevance of other living beings.

Nowadays the human species has already detached from its original primal self: we have developed into individualist beings, longing for money as an almighty God and with modern industrial capitalism as an unstoppable disease. This profit-seeking system is *per se* ecologically unsustainable, for the dehumanization goes hand in hand with a destructive dynamic towards nature, as it can be seen in *The Road*. In this extreme scenario, where the feared cataclysm has already happened, human values are put into doubt. However, each character is differently affected, probably due to their differences in age and experience. Ergo, the two characters are personifications of very different values. On the one hand, the boy, grows and matures over the course of the journey. The father, in contrast, still lives through his memories of the world before the cataclysm. The figure of the man recalls the values of the old world (considering the idea that the story could be set in the future, these ideas would represent present society), based on tenacity, sacrifice and individualism, to some extent. The new environment has forced him to maximise those features, yet he still maintains the good values of empathy and kindness. Indeed his only objective is to survive in order to provide his son with a better future.

My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?

Yes.

He sat there cowered in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys.

And we always will be. (McCarthy 77)

I consider it important to emphasise the idea of remaining faithful to one's values, because, in a society where violence is dominant, the individual is very likely to succumb to the temptation of the dark side. The most notorious exemplification of evil are the cannibals who kidnap, cage and quarter people in order to eat them. The act of not killing humans for feeding seems to be a sign of empathy; an empathy that can be equivalent to not consuming animal products or contributing to their unfair slaughter nowadays. Because of this, the innocent boy considers relevant the fact that someone does not eat humans in order to trust that person. The boy's naivety can be clearly seen in the last scene when he is found by a man after his father has died, and he does not agree to go with him until he has ensured he does not eat people (McCarthy 283-284). The following excerpt is another instance of the loyal determination of the protagonists towards their values regarding cannibalism.

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now.

You said we weren't.

I said we weren't dying. I didn't say we weren't starving.

But we wouldn't.

No. We wouldn't.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire. (McCarthy 128-129)

Despite both characters' goodness, the reader can observe that the father's survival instinct ignites his individualist side, while the boy maintains his generosity and empathy towards the wandering survivors they run into along the road. That is, the man is implicitly seized by Darwinian ideas which urge him to protect himself and his son no matter how. On the contrary, the child personifies the values of solidarity and humanity, since, in spite of the hard circumstances, he has not lost hope and aims to find a community of "good guys" who "carry the fire", thinking further into the future.

Overall, I would state that the purity of the boy's values, together with the most primeval instincts of self-preservation of the father, represent the true nature of humans. On the other hand, the corrupted values of the "bad guys" symbolise the increasing deterioration and dehumanization of present-day society.

7. Conclusion

As I already examined, *The Road* could be considered to be a dystopian work as exemplified by its setting. Place has played a crucial role in McCarthy's works, and in the 2006 novel this element is notably of significance. The American writer highlights the influence of external forces on human relations and the issue of survival through a fiction work. Moreover, it could also be said that McCarthy refines his efforts on re-mythologising the American West through a distinctive road novel.

Besides, I believe that the re-writing of the institutionalized utopian imagery of the American Dream, turning it into a dystopian and hopeless version of the myth of the West, is McCarthy's way of criticising contemporary values. As Orwell and Huxley previously accomplished, the author of *The Road* anticipates the ongoing decline of humanity and the planet, warning about the fragility of the environment and human values. Being a modern novel, I think that the story of the father and son cannot be detached from current environmental and sociopolitical problems. That is, in my opinion, the symbols and matters that McCarthy presents in the story have a highly critical focus. For instance, the man-made creations that last (buildings, oil stations, or the road itself), in contrast to the extinct nature, are a symbol for human impact and the uncontrollable damage that our species has caused throughout history. As McCarthy himself con-

firmed, he inspired the plot in his vision of the city El Paso in a hundred years' time. Therefore, I can argue that, although dystopias do not always reflect futuristic scenarios but rather undesirable ones, this novel is a dystopian foresight that aims to stir people's consciences. Indeed, in spite of McCarthy's ambiguity regarding the cause of the cataclysm, I agree with the academics who have already hypothesized that current capitalist and over-consumerist society is responsible for the destruction of all fauna and flora.

Overall, my impression is that *The Road* portrays the essential role of nature, emphasising the fact that without nature, survival is impossible. The bare world in which father and son dwell does not even allow them to think about a long-term future. As part of the ecosystem, humans are dependant of nature, and consequently, human civilization itself cannot ensure the endurance of the species after all natural resources have been exhausted. This idea brings present social values into focus. Nowadays there is a false impression of improvement due to the domination of scientific and technological developments. Yet, at the same time, nature is deteriorating, which seems not to preoccupy us enough to take action. McCarthy demonstrates that it is more likely to imagine the Earth's wreck than to think about a sociopolitical change that could reverse the environmental damage. I believe that this novel's grey scenario stands for the real dimensions of the environmental crisis and that it efficiently raises awareness about reality: the destruction of nature will bring our own death too.

This destruction might come as a result of the individualistic preferences and economic interests that rule the current capitalist society. Ergo, through the portrait of the expansion of evil and negative values McCarthy symbolizes the ongoing corruption of human beings. He is symbolically reflecting that our anthropocentric view will only lead us towards destruction, and that we should assume that we have a symbiotic relationship with the living and non-living nature that surrounds us.

To conclude, I maintain that *The Road* is a cautionary tale about the environment with a strong message. Hence, this novel may raise awareness about individual and collective responsibility in a world where a rather pessimistic future awaits all earthlings if we do not take action.

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