

Are there any reasons for hope in mccarthys the road essay

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Cormac McCarthy was born in 1936 and has enjoyed some critical and popular acclaim for his fiction, but his reputation soared with the publication of *The Road* in 2006. In 2007 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and in 2008 the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction, a highly prestigious UK book award. Greenwood (120) comments, " While McCarthy's work has been understood as quintessentially American, there is something transcendent about *The Road*." However, judged against McCarthy's other fiction there seems to be an overwhelmingly bleak nihilism and paucity of hope in the post-apocalyptic world that the father and his son travel through. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether there are any grounds for hope at all in McCarthy's terrifying vision of the future.

In the post-apocalyptic world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* there might seem to be little room for optimism or hope of any kind. The world that the father in *The Road* and his son travel through is fraught with dangers, filled with death and destruction and it has forced humanity back to its most primitive level. They are surrounded by death - its constant presence and its constant threat. Their journey is almost without rest and they feel at risk and in danger all the time. They have to scavenge for food and, unlike similar post-apocalyptic stories in McCarthy's world nature has failed to regenerate: " In *The Road* nature fails to equilibrate after humanity's end. The world is not reclaimed by plants and creatures." Giggs 202. Therefore, this vision of the future is one of the bleakest in fiction, and, on a more practical level, because no animals have survived, there is constant pressure on the father to find food simply for his son to survive. Green critics have especially warmed to the book, seeing it as a warning specifically about humanity's

damage to the environment. We are not specifically told the cause of the apocalypse, although the father has memories of attacks and bombs falling, so it seems as if most life on the planet had been destroyed in some terribly destructive war. The climate has changed too: it is permanent winter and the father and son are travelling to the ocean in the hope that the weather there will be better and there will be more to eat.

As the novel proceeds it becomes apparent that the mother of the family has committed suicide because the daily struggle for survival is too much for her to bear. McCarthy carefully delays the revelation of the worst aspect of this future world until well into the novel. Cant (186) provides an apt summary:

Only human beings remain, and those few in number. Murderous feral groups roam the country killing and eating their fellows, such is the reduced state of their being. Infants are roasted on spits and captives are locked in a cellar that is in effect a larder.

Humanity has sunk to a level lower than animals, because they have become a species that preys on itself - an interesting symbol, perhaps, of the way McCarthy sees not only the future, but humanity's behaviour towards itself now, in the present. This is why the revolver that the father and son keep has eventually only one round left - which the son must keep for himself to avoid a humiliating and painful death at the hands of the cannibal gangs. This also explains the way the father and son refer to themselves throughout the text as the "good guys" who are "carrying the fire." Cant (188) argues that "The fire symbolizes that vitality that burns within the ardent heart, the

mystery that is the spark of life itself and needs no reason to exist. “ And in the novel this “ fire” is seen through the father’s care and protection for his son, his ardent hope that the civilized values of humanity can survive the apocalypse that has engulfed the planet.

There seems little reason for hope when we consider some key passages in the novel. One morning the father wakes and asks God:

Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (McCarthy 58)

It seems as if the father has lost all faith in God.

The mother, just before she died, had put her own feelings, and the father’s future, even more bleakly:

My heart was ripped out the night he [the son] was born so don’t ask for sorrow now. There is none.... one thing I can tell you is you won’t survive for yourself.... As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart. (McCarthy 37)

This is a statement that expresses complete nihilism. There is no purpose to life and the only hope is for “ eternal nothingness.” However, the father’s fidelity to his son invalidates slightly the mother’s pessimism; it is his fidelity to his son and his loving protection of him that proves humanity – of a sort – exists in this frightening future world. He makes his sense of responsibility clear to his son:

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? (McCarthy 68)

The man and his strong paternal feelings for his son show that some normality has survived the disaster that has befallen the planet - and this is a reason to hope.

The father and son eventually reach the ocean where there is no more food than anywhere else and where the weather is just as bad. The father succumbs to his illness; he has been coughing up blood throughout the novel and knows he is dying. The boy is not sure what to do and stays with his father's body until he meets the man in the yellow parka - the single bright colour, the colour of hope, perhaps, and life - and agrees to join him and his family, having asked the most important question: " You don't eat people", to which the man replies, " No. We don't eat people." (McCarthy 253) With his characteristic " Okay" the boy agrees to join the man's family - and there is a sense of hope in that. The boy's repeated " Okay" takes on special resonance as the novel proceeds: he wants the world to be " Okay" again and humanity to return to normal. His simple repeated " Okay" becomes a mantra of hope.

In conclusion, therefore, we can argue that there is some limited hope for humanity. It lies in the memories and flashbacks that the father had on the road; it lies in the son's adoption into the family of the man with the yellow ski parka; it lies in the son himself and his preservation by his father who shows loyalty and devotion through his care and protection of his son; it lies in the continued existence of " good guys" who are " carrying the fire"; and,

strangely, it lies within The Road itself – Cant (197) writes

The Road expresses that paradox that lies at the heart of all serious pessimistic literature: its literary passion defies the very emptiness that it proclaims.

The Road's success has surely forced its readers to face the appalling nature of one of our possible futures.

Works Cited

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