

## POST-APOCALYPTIC SOUTH IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD* (2006)

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Cormac McCarthy's depiction of the post-apocalyptic South of the USA as manifested in his novel *The Road* (2006). Despite there is almost no explicit reference to the American South in the novel and despite the fact the novel is reminiscent of post-apocalyptic sci-fi fantasy the author of the paper argues the novel depicts not only the post-apocalyptic world destroyed by technology and consumerism, but also specifically American South and its traditional values and morality which is, in his view, indicated by references to the southern direction where the main characters are heading. At the same time, the novel is understood as a work expressing a critique of various aspects of the myth of the American Dream and as an expression of a hope for moral regeneration of both the USA and South which is, in Kušnír's view, expressed especially by the symbolic ending of the novel.

**Key words:** apocalypse, American south, American Dream, consumerism, postmodernism, technology

Despite the ambiguity of many literary categories and literary "canonization", the term Southern literature has become an integral part of American literary history, expressing the specificity of literature of the American South and the complexity of its culture. Modernity, industrialism and, more recently, globalization have contributed to the eradication of economic and social differences between the American South and the North (Reed, 1991; Tindall, 1991) but, as many critics argue, the South has still retained its cultural specificity derived from historical experience and its conflict with the rapidly changing present marked by technological development and consumerism. Southern identity was often associated with slavery, racism and the civil war which resulted in the creation of the myth of the so-called "lost cause". In the view of Louis D. Rubin, Jr., (1991: 5):

If Southern sectional identity were dependent upon slavery, then the loss of the war and the end of slavery should have destroyed this identity. They did not... in defeat the South not only retained its sense of identity, but added to it the mythos of a lost cause, a sense of ancestral pieties and loyalties bequeathed through suffering, and a unity that comes through common deprivation and shared hatred and adversity.

Rubin (1991:17) further observes that “To be a Southerner today is still to be heir to a complex set of attitudes and affinities, assumptions and instincts, which are the product of history acting upon geography, even though much of the history is now forgotten and the geography modified.” In Rubin’s view, therefore, the specificity of literature of the American South combines regional and historical experience which expresses its difference from general American literature. History, slavery, the idea of the lost cause, racism, and a sense of family and community are not, however, the only themes of Southern literature. George B. Tindall (1991:169) notes that “the romantic plantation myth of gentility” and its conflict with the “obverse... abolitionist plantation myth of barbarity” as being other themes of Southern literature related to historical experience. And John Shelton Reed (1991:30) argues that “In this century at least, one of the most striking differences between the South and the rest of the United States has been the nature of the South’s religious life” which is, in his view, mostly united by strict adherence to Protestant religion and religious practice, however diverse the denominations it may be formed by (Baptism, Methodism, and Presbyterianism). Religion plays an important role in the work of many Southern authors, the best known of whom is probably Flannery O’Connor. Matthew Guinn (2000: xx) considers organic wholeness for humanity and the validity of history to be other characteristic features of Southern literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Walter Sullivan’s view (in Arbeit 2006: 29), the main literary sources of southern literature are the folk tradition, interest in story-telling, myth making, and the connection of man to the land. All these features and themes have come through various narrative transformations. While Erskine Caldwell and his generation used naturalistic techniques to show decaying traditional values of the American South, William Faulkner and Flannery O’ Connor have shown the absurdity of human existence and a disintegration of the former glory and the way of life in the South in the context of historical experience, the present and religion, which formed a modernist and pessimistic vision of reality. In Marcel Arbeit’s and other critics’ view (Arbeit 2006: 33), Southern literature of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s was still influenced by the Faulknerian vision of the world and his depiction of traditional themes, but this situation changed, not only in Arbeit’s view, in the late 1970’s with new authors who abandoned traditional scepticism and whose interest became the future rather than the past. In his *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South*, Matthew Guinn identifies new emerging authors of the American South who are, in his view,

Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, Harry Crews, Richard Ford, Kaye Gibbons, Barry Hannah, Randall Kenan, Bobbie Ann Mason and Cormac McCarthy. Guinn (2000: xi) maintains that “These authors differ greatly from their predecessors in Southern fiction and among themselves, yet they share a decisive break from the themes, patterns, and concerns of earlier twentieth-century Southern fiction.”

In Guinn’s view (xi), these authors “defy the traditional approaches to history, place, and community.” They often use postmodern narrative techniques to relativize the myth of the American South. Matthew Guinn (2000: xvi) considers Barry Hannah and Cormac McCarthy to be the most important postmodern authors of this generation. Postmodern narrative techniques enable these authors to relativize Southern mythology and give an alternative and more playful view of both the American South and the myth created about it.

Cormac McCarthy’s fiction has evolved from more traditional, modernist (*The Orchard Keeper*, *Suttree*) and even postmodernist narratives, as some critics argue. These postmodern narrative techniques are represented especially by his novel *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy, however, holds an ambiguous position not only because of his use of narrative techniques, but also because of the thematic alterity in his later novels. For example, Alan Bilton (2002: 132) qualifies McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy* to be rather Western than Southern fiction. McCarthy’s most recent novel, *The Road*, seems to be quite ambiguous in relation to its possible status as a Southern novel because of the author’s use of formal literary devices and narrative techniques. The title evokes a modern American myth of mobility associated with the present rather than the past. Interest in the past would rather be a typical concern of earlier Southern literature. The road, mobility and traveling become a central metaphor of this novel depicting an unnamed father and his son traveling to an indefinite sea coast in their hope of finding shelter and a way out from the post-apocalyptic and destroyed country haunted by violent and cannibalistic gangs. McCarthy does not mention local names, places, characters or geographical areas in this novel. The journey of these two protagonists across an indefinite wasteland is reminiscent of the situation after a nuclear disaster in a post-apocalyptic space. Despite this, however, McCarthy’s narrator does not mention any war, any past, any motivation that might possibly have caused it. From this perspective, the novel acquires rather an allegorical dimension since the characters, places and situations are symbolic rather than specific, and they create meaning through McCarthy’s systematic use of

symbolism creating an allegorical framework. If understood in connection with the modern American myth of mobility and traveling as expressed in road movies and novels such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the symbolism of the road and traveling should represent the idea of freedom and a westward expansion, but McCarthy reverses this myth in his novel. The road rather symbolizes a way to salvation along which the protagonists have to overcome obstacles and temptation (to stop off, to occupy some houses or leave them, to eat or to keep food, to kill or to be killed) in order to survive. This evokes existentialist implications, and the narrative framework is vaguely reminiscent of an existentialist modernized version of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The road thus does not symbolize a final destination and a place of freedom, but a means through which basic existential needs and survival can be secured. At the same time, with the road and highways traditionally symbolizing the industrial development of the USA, progress and optimism become symbolic sites of the protagonists' observation of destruction as a result of advanced technology and commercialism. The idea of decay and disintegration is enhanced by the imagery of darkness, decay and gloom. This can be seen at the very beginning of the novel (McCarthy, 2006: 7):

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered...He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see. No smoke.

In this passage, the city, nature, advertisements implying consumerism, and the road symbolizing progress and optimism, are not different from each other but rather presented as one whole framed by the image of darkness, waste, disintegration and death, leading into nothingness. The father and son are post-apocalyptic pilgrims trying to find not only shelter and survival but also humanity in the inhuman world of consumerism, industrialism, waste and violence. Father and son represent hope in the improvement of society and humanity but, as their traveling experience accompanied by incidents with various freak and violent characters

reveals, there is no hope, only violence, despair and destruction resulting from the effects of industrialism and commercialism influencing human relationships. Like in the westerns, you can either kill to survive, or be killed. The father has no natural propensity to violence, but understands violence rationally as a means of survival to save his and his son's lives. This violence is thus also modified/tempered by his humanity represented by the love for his son. Although it seems that McCarthy's novel is similar to the violence of the Caldwellian and Faulknerian type, the nature of his violence is rather different. While Caldwellian and Faulknerian violence stems from their protagonists' social condition and their relationship to the land and history, McCarthy's violence is not associated with the past but with the future, and it is not a result of decaying human relationships caused by historical experience, but by the misuse of technology and by consumerism destroying not only Southern, but also more general human values.

The setting, atmosphere and narrative framework imply this is a science-fiction novel on the post-apocalyptic world with naturalistic, Western and horror elements, which also gives a critique of inhumanity caused by industrial progress and consumerism. This inhumanity stands in contrast to human relationships and love as represented by the father and his son. Sci-fi elements represent the contemporary advanced technological world and manifest themselves in McCarthy's depiction of the destroyed world after an indefinite disaster, and partly in the destroyed setting. Naturalism can be seen in McCarthy's observation of detail and violence, and horror in his depiction of scenes with unexpected suspense. This can be seen in the following passage depicting cannibalism (McCarthy 2006: 167): "He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him..." McCarthy, however, modifies and undermines the generic conventions of these popular literary genres. The combination of horror and naturalistic elements does not represent an end in itself, that is to depict horror for horror's sake, but it involves close observation of social detail. Horror in combination with naturalistic elements intensifies the feelings of disgust and fear associated with negative effects of the development of western civilization leading to decay and destruction. In contrast to most sci-fi literary conventions, decay and destruction in the futuristic environment here, however, does not indicate any solution, possibility or hope, but rather despair, nothingness and nihilism. This manifests itself at the end of the novel depicting

the death of the boy's father, although the boy's meeting with the "good guys" who save him may indicate some hope for the future. Here McCarthy modifies and partly transforms the traditional framework of the sci-fi novel. His basic setting and narrative framework is definitely not a kind of postmodern cyberpunk showing a complicated world of advanced technologies and virtual realities. McCarthy confiscates and transforms only one aspect of traditional dystopian science fiction, that is the setting after a nuclear disaster to show the destruction of humanity by rapid technological progress resulting in consumerism, decay, alienation and inhumanity. Although the novel is rather an allegory on the post-apocalyptic world, there are indications of the connection of the novel to both Western and Southern literary traditions.

In addition to violence and horror common to both Naturalism and the Western, it is especially McCarthy's depiction of the father who is reminiscent of a cowboy character known from the Western literary tradition. The post-apocalyptic world as depicted by McCarthy is reminiscent of the arena in which the fight between good and evil must take place and justice be restored. As in the Westerns, one can overcome violence only by applying it oneself, otherwise one cannot protect oneself, one's family or justice. The father is thus reminiscent of an iconic cowboy or sheriff from the Westerns who must provide his son with security by the use of violence. The generic conventions of the Western are modified here, however, and justice and law are not restored, since the character (father) reminiscent of a sheriff and protector of justice finally dies. He does not die in a brave fight like the characters in the Westerns, however, but naturally because of illness, and thus order cannot be restored. Quite paradoxically/parodically, it is not a victorious fight which saves the boy, but his father's death which implies religious symbolism and connotations. It is not brutal force, or Darwinian survival of the fittest, but humanity and sacrifice reminiscent of Jesus' salvation of mankind through suffering embodied by the father which leads to the boy's salvation, and thus symbolically to the salvation of humanity and perhaps, more generally, mankind. This narrative pattern may be also understood as a modification of another religious myth more specifically connected to American experience, which is Mary Rowlandson's myth of regeneration through violence, applied here, however, to the post-apocalyptic condition. In addition, the post-apocalyptic world is closely connected not only to science fiction and dystopic literature, but also to the Biblical world as known from the *Book of Revelation*.

Thus McCarthy uses not only the myth of salvation through sacrifice, but also a religious myth more specifically connected to American experience, that is the myth of regeneration through violence. Thus the apocalyptic Biblical vision becomes another religious connotation in his novel. This (post) apocalyptic world can be, as implied by McCarthy's depiction of the father, restored by sacrifice (of the father) bringing back humanity and love - which are typical Christian moral ideals.

Although it does not seem so, the novel is also implicitly connected with the Southern literary tradition. Despite the indefinite space and time, the characters travel to the "south" and towards the sea. The sea, and perhaps the country and partly the architecture the protagonists travel through imply the geographical area of the south, but this area is symbolic rather than a real place. The south as depicted by McCarthy thus becomes symbolic rather than specific or realistic. The South the protagonists are heading to is not a Faulknerian or Caldwellian specific, historical and tragic, but rather Poe's symbolic South. The father and son's journey to the south as a possible place of escape and salvation may imply a restoration of Southern culture and traditional moral values – but only if we go too far with interpretation. When the characters reach the seashore and the south, they discover the same disintegrated, dark, gloomy and destroyed place indistinguishable from the rest of the country (182):

An hour later they were sitting on the beach and staring out at the wall of smog across the horizon. They sat with their heels dug into the sand and watched the bleak sea wash up at their feet. Cold. Desolate. Birdless...Further down the saltbleached ribcages of what may have been cattle. Gray salt rime on the rocks.

McCarthy's symbolic depiction of the south as indistinguishable from the rest of the country suggests several connotations. On the one hand, it may imply his critique of its uniformity caused by industrialization, modernity and perhaps even globalization, all leading not only to ostensible industrial progress but also to consumerism, which eradicates its specificity and makes this place more universal and similar to other places influenced by the same industrial and technological development. Thus the South becomes a universal, history-less and indefinite place, the regional specificity of which has been eradicated. On the other hand, the one who is saved at the end of the novel is the boy, who agrees to live with the others who his father would call "good guys". This may indicate a symbolic representation of

a belief in the ability of the South and Southern culture to retain its identity and values, which must be stimulated by tragic experience of the past, however, to avoid a tragic and apocalyptic future. The past in the novel is not represented only by the tragedy of violence, war or the destruction related to it, but also by the boy's father, who may represent true and positive values such as humanity and love. This manifests itself at the end of the novel when the boy returns to mourn his dead father (McCarthy, 2006: 240-241): "He walked back into the woods and knelt beside his father...He cried for a long time. I'll talk to you every day, he whispered. And I won't forget. No matter what. Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road." The boy's father is this manifestation of value that connects the boy with both his personal present and the future of the South he probably remains to live in. It must be a South bearing historical memory, experience and the tragedy of the past, although transformed by absorbing the positive values of humanity, love and imagination. It should be the South able to resist Biblical evil, violence and temptation as materialized by technological and consumerist present. This South should retain its close connection to nature and should value imagination symbolized by storytelling rather than rationality, profit and consumption, as indicated in the final pastoral passage of the novel reminiscent of Richard Brautigan's imagery and which implies the author's concerns with ecological pollution, such as Brautigan similarly expressed in his novels some 30 years before (McCarthy, 2006:241):

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smell of moss in your hand...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.

As I have pointed out above, Southern identity has often been defined as closely connected with the myth of a family generating a myth of community rather than Yankee individualism. The father and son, however, represent individualism as known from both Yankee and Western cultural traditions, and what some critics would term bourgeois individualistic Robinsonian values as known from Daniel Defoe's novels. Both father and son are able to survive because of their skillfulness and the ability to use and transform their

environment (land) to survive. But, as McCarthy finally and perhaps symbolically indicates, the father's death may represent the death of individualism and the idea that the boy's survival is possible not through individualism, but through the re-establishment of the community as represented by the family the boy finally decides to live with.

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