

## The Depiction of Violence in Cormac McCarthy`s novel: *The Road*

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### Introduction

*"The clock`s 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 didn`t answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the light switch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the window glass."* (McCarthy 2009, 54)

This is the moment where my essay is starting and where mankind is possibly heading. To the place of no return. What is it? The final change of our world. The world of timelessness and colorlessness is born; moreover, the world of endless misery is born as well. Cormac McCarthy`s novel *The Road* gives us a dreadful prophecy. The prophecy of violent world where nothingness finally achieves its physical shape. My topic is a depiction of violence in the novel. But I believe that the violence in the novel is the tool how to create a novel with specific environment where the fundamental questions of philosophy could be re-answered. The author of the novel violently destroyed our world by the nameless catastrophe. By the catastrophe, he created a real waste land where only the real values could survive. The waste land of McCarthy`s novel is complete opposite to our world. All the material things are gone, only the transcendence of love between the father and the son remains as something powerful.

*"In a secular world, where the transcendent is marginalised in favour of the material, terror is the new creed of a new hyper-real generation."* (Beville 2009, 33)

To restart humanity and love in its essence, we need to visit a gloomy world. But not gloomy ordinarily, but gloomy so extremely that no light is shining there. World so dark that the darkness in it, is shining like the strongest star. This darkness cannot be destroyed by the light of our shining postmodern society, but by the true light. It is the light of awoken human soul, that burns inside every human being. Unfortunately, the essence of human light was lost during our blackish history and the darkness was slowly penetrating our fragile world. There were two World Wars and holocaust; moreover, there is the threat of nuclear catastrophe. We live in the century, where apocalyptic Armageddon is possible, yet it is not Armageddon sent by God. It is the Armageddon which is entirely of human construction. The world depicted in the novel was destroyed by the human Armageddon. The world of dark tranquility is the result of the human existence.

*"The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again."* (McCarthy 2009, 10)

The world depicted in the novel can be described as hauntological. The past which is the evidence of human existence is shattered. History is only terrible ghost that lingers through the waste lands of the old world. Everything which was created and achieved by mankind, was turned to the vortex of coldness and disintegration. It can seem quite mad to search for the essence of humanity in this world, but maybe it is necessary to destroy the world to reveal the hidden place of humanity. In human history there were attempts to create something perfect e.g. society, piece of art but we were capable of creating only perfect darkness. What is the scariest aspect of McCarthy's vision is that mankind destroyed the beauty that is not product of human existence, but the beauty which was given to us as a gift. It is the beauty of the world itself.

### **Violence and namelessness**

These two words (violence and namelessness) are the adjectives which are shaping the pilgrimage of the protagonists of the novel.

*"The journey of these two protagonists across indefinite wasteland is reminiscent of the situation after nuclear disaster in a post-apocalyptic space. Despite this, however, McCarthy's narrator does not mention any war, any past, any motivation that might have possibly caused it."* (Kušnir 2012, 3)

We don't know, what exactly have happened. We don't even know the names of two protagonists. There is only a man and a boy. The namelessness creates a haunting atmosphere of whispering. The novel whispers that this can happen to anyone. Everything in what we believe and what we have is gone in one second. All our memories, desires and dreams are gone. Only the rotten evidence of the past is apparent. Only what is left for the man and the boy is violent struggle for existence in the hostile world.

The violence is depicted in the novel in its real essence. The violence is cruel, dark, evil and apparent everywhere. The world was destroyed by violence and the surviving mankind is violently hunting each other.

*"Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunk in their rotten clothes. The small wad of burning paper drew to a wisp of flame and then died out leaving a faint pattern for just a moment in the incandescence like the shape of flower, a molten rose."* (McCarthy, 2008, 48)

Human beings are the products of the world. If the world is full of colours and happiness then human beings are full of colours and happiness. This world is a rose which was given to us in its full beauty. We search for beauty in arts, but the real beauty is hidden in nature and mankind. Violence is the greatest sickness of human history. Violence can be easily compared to cancer. Every human being has the seeds of violence inside his own body. Violence is necessity for our survival. Violence was necessity for the father in the novel. He wanted to defend his son; furthermore, he wanted to feed and clothe his son. He wanted to be a real father for his son. I do not want to excuse violent behavior, but violence was necessity for their survival.

In the novel there are two main attitudes towards the use of violence. The first attitude is represented by father, because he understands violence as the necessity for their survival. The second attitude is represented by the innocence of the child. The boy is naive and he still believe in the innocence of mankind. Their relationship can be described as the struggle between the consciousness and the necessity.

*"The idealisation of the child is reflected in the Road: the father`s determined pragmatism in the face of potential danger is constantly challenged by the boy`s assertion of the claims of conscience."* (Cant, 2009, 189)

The boy`s soul is untouched by darkness of the world. He was born to the world of darkness. The connection with the world of beauty is his father. Is his father capable to transfer the beauty of the lost world to the soul of his son?

The boy is depicted as an alien. He does not belong to this world. The boy sees only disintegrated world of the nameless past. Is he capable of understanding his father`s behavior? The boy`s mother wanted to kill him. The mother saw it as the only possibility. She saw death as salvation. She was trying to persuade her own husband to kill his son. She did not succeed so she left them. The father did not see death as a solution. He was thinking about his decision. Moreover, he was not sure whether he was right. He was affected by the ethics of the lost world. Was it a Christian ethics?

The situation in which the father found himself reminds me the Biblical story. It is a tale of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his own son for the glory of God. Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his own son for the glory of God. In the last moment he was stopped. The father from the novel is not capable of sacrificing his son. He would rather kill himself than to kill his own son. Can we apply Christian ethics to the Godless world of the novel? In the novel they are using the word God, but what kind of God does it represent?

*"The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac."* (<http://sorenkierkegaard.org/fear-and-trembling.html>)

This is another interpretation of the Biblical story. Can we apply the ethics of a philosopher to the novel? The novel depicts the world were everything which symbolizes the old world is gone. The knowledge of the old world is burnt as the books which were carrying it. Is it ethical to let one`s own son to live in the world of violence? Can we apply religion or ethics to understand the behavior of the father? If we do it, we will not understand the father and the son. Their relationship holds a special place. The place where no formal knowledge can be applied. Their relationship redefines the relationship between Father and the son. The son can be complete creation of the father. The only one and true source of knowledge for the boy is his father.

*"The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone."* (McCarthy, 2009, 28)

The father was the witness of the death of the old values. He was the only evidence of their existence and their bearer. The past of the old world was transformed into the memory of the father. The representation of the old world is in complete control of the father. This puts the father to the special position in which he can completely control his son vision of the old world. The father can enhance the boy`s soul for something new or for the preservation of the old values.

### **The Father and the Son**

Abraham and Isaac stood at the beggng of our world, and father and son stand at its end. We cannot firmly say that it is the end of the world, but we can say that it is the end of one era. What is the role of the father and the son? Who are they? The narrator says:

*"We`re survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp."* (McCarthy, 2008, 57)

The word survivor has a positive meaning. They have survived the catastrophe. They should be glad. For father, they were survivors, yet for the mother they were just prolonging their suffering. The father saw their situation as a crisis which could be survived. After the submission of the mother they remained alone. The father was trying to persuade his son that they are a good guys and that they are carrying the fire.

*"Are we still the good guys? he said. Yes. We`re still the good guys."* (McCarthy, 2009, 81)

*"We`re going to be okay, arent we Papa?"*

*Yes. We are.*

*And nothing bad is going to happen to us.*

*That`s right.*

*Because we`re carrying the fire."* (McCarthy, 2008, 87)

The relationship between father and son is a based on the image of good guys and on their role. They role was to carry the fire. The image of goodness and the image of fire needs to be understood in its ontological sense. Because I think that these two images are redefining the relationship between the father and the son. What is goodness and fire in its essence? The deconstruction of the old world enables us to grasp the essential meaning of goodness and the fire of human soul.

The use of violence in McCarthy`s novel was necessary for establishing the setting, where only the strongest virtues can survive. The whole novel is fulfilled with the father`s love and devotion. The idea of carrying the fire is repeated throughout the text. But there is nothing as a strict definition of the fire. The last moments of the father`s life are dedicated to the fire.

*You cant. You have to carry the fire.*

*I dont know how to.*

*Yes you do.*

*It is real? The fire?*

*Where it is? I dont know where it is.*

*Yes you do. It`s inside you. It was always there.* (McCarthy, 2009, 298)

This is the clearest definition of the fire within the book. The fire is life itself. The fire is the life in its full eagerness to live. This means that the bearer of fire is eager to live. I have already wrote about the role of father in the novel. The role of the father is to lit that fire that burns inside the boy`s soul. This is the role of the father. Every father needs to enlighten his own son.

Throughout the novel, McCarthy is referring to God. I think that God of the novel is the man. Every father who is willing to sacrifice himself for his son is God. Every father who lights the fire inside his own son`s soul is God. McCarthy created a post-apocalyptic novel fulfilled with dreadfulness. I suppose that the novel as such is an allegory. McCarthy needed to create post-apocalyptic world to prove that no God will stop human madness. God does not exist in material world nor in the sky. God exists in every human being. The essence of God inside human beings is the fire. The message of the novel is that we need to carry the fire no matter what. If we stop carrying the fire the world of nothingness will come without invitation. At the begging of the essay, I was writing about the disappearance of materiality our world. Maybe McCarthy is trying to say that it is the time, for valuing human spirit. We value religions, material things, money but we extremely disrespect human spirit. Do we need to create godless world to realize where real God dwells? This is the message of McCarthy`s novel. We need to destroy everything in order to restore our essence again. Our essence is a burning fire which enlightens the dark world in which we exists.

### **The Ontology of the Human Fire**

To grasp the essence of the fire in McCarthy`s novel we need to analyze the first concept of fire as something abstract. The first philosophical concept which used fire as the fundament of the world was the concept created by Heraclitus.

*This world-order [kosmos], the same of all, no god nor man did create, but it ever was and is and will be: everliving fire, kindling in measures and being quenched in measures. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Ont>)*

For Heraclitus the fire was representing constant change and constant struggle which creates this world. Fire as such was the essence of this world. The father in the novel was trying to lit that fire inside his son. His son need to be like Heraclitus's fire in order to survive. The son needed to be capable to adapt very quickly in order to survive. Despite the change the son would be the same in the essence and this means that he will hold on the values of his father, but he would be able to change.

This could be loosely connected to our hyper-real postmodern existence. We live in the dark era which is changing constantly. We need to adapt very swiftly, but still we need to preserve our essence of humanity in order to stay truly human. This can be interpreted as the message of McCarthy to the fathers of postmodern period that they need to lit the fire inside their sons.

In the image of fire, we can also find the essence of post modernity itself. The essence is constant change of our existence. Nothing is stable and human beings cannot

gain full stability in their everyday life. This could be another message of McCarthy's novel. Do not rely on the knowledge of the old books which can be burned easily. Rely on yourself and on your fire. From this point of view the fire can be understood as the will to live.

### **The Destruction of the post-modern world**

The novel is destructive in relation to our post-modern world. It has destroyed our world quite systematically. The violence of the novel revealed the barest core of human society. We can say that the environment of the novel created a space for an ontological discourse. The discourse between the father and the son. This is the power of McCarthy's novel. The novel is written in simple style with simple vocabulary, and is a complete opposite to our complicated world. The post-modern world is ambiguous and evasive.

*"His descriptions of place and landscape are characteristically eidetic; an effect that is produced by sentences that are rich in nouns but devoid of verbs."* (Cant, 2009, 184)

The novel is simple in its style, but the words are chosen carefully. The fact that everything is described in an eidetic way is important for the novel. Everything is described in its essence. This kind of environment emphasizes the power of ontological discourses between the father and the son. Such a complicated issue as the essence of the human soul is explained by simple dialogues between the father and the son. This is the evidence of McCarthy's mastery. In our post-modern world full of complicated and multinational questions, there is a need for simple questions; moreover, there is a need for simple and striking answers.

What is destroying the simplicity of the message of the novel is its end. The end of the novel brings questions and ambiguity. McCarthy did not give us the answer for what would happen after the disappearance of the boy with the new family. He let the boy disappear as he let the old world disappear. The boy is disappearing with the new family, but he is conscious of his fire. What is the meaning of the last paragraph?

*"Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see... 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 older than man and they hummed of mystery."* (McCarthy, 2009, 307)

Is the last paragraph referring to our past or to our future? If the last paragraph refers to the future, then we have hope that everything will be reestablished. If the last paragraph refers to the past, then we need to realize that we can lose things that are older than man. What are older things than man? Love? Beauty? Nature? The world itself is older than mankind. The world as such is the greatest gift that was given to mankind and there are still places which are full of mysteries. These mysteries are older than man. These mysteries can be recognized only by those who carry the fire.

*"The mystery hums in the ardent heart but not forever."* (Cant, 2009, 197)

**The usage of violence**

Violence in the novel is the instrument which creates a haunting atmosphere where the fundamental aspects of human existence such as love, sacrifice would restore its powerfulness and importance. These values are the pillars of humanity. Violence of the novel can be understood as a form of background which is emphasizing the warmth core of human love. The novel is called *The Road* and the reading of the novel is violent journey of re-discovery of human essence.

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