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THE ROAD TO SALVATION

***AN ANALYSIS OF SURVIVAL NOTIONS IN
CORMAC McCARTHY'S THE ROAD***

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ABSTRACT: This paper contends that McCarthy's novel *The Road* becomes a symbolic survival guide in a world that has been devastated by an unknown catastrophe. The work provides an examination of the diverse elements and symbols that are suggested in the book as being essential for human survival in an environment detached from all forms of nature. Likewise, it discusses a number of elements that, given the condition of that world, would not only be of no use for survival anymore, but would also be an impediment to succeed and survive under the circumstances experienced by the protagonists. All these elements, the essential and the useless ones, are decisive in one way or another when it comes to understand the reasons why some people may survive in the novel.

1-INTRODUCTION

McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) presents an ashen, post-apocalyptic world. In this land of remains, a father and his son travel south hoping to find a better place to live. Their pilgrimage gives the book a biblical undertone: its story is interwoven with the quest for a homeland that so often appears in the Bible, and which represents not just a physical pilgrimage, but also a spiritual one. The landscape described in *The Road* shows that there are no animals left, no water, and no light but the one from the actual and emotional fire they carry, which reminds us of the Wasteland that T.S. Eliot described in his famous poem. As Lydia Cooper contends in her article "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative," the novel resembles the Wasteland in terms of geographical description and its address to social and ethical concerns, but there is something that stands out as a difference: "If Eliot's Wasteland is more purgatory than hell, however, the father's waste land may be closer to a place of absolute damnation" (Cooper 2001: 228).

Little is told about what brought about the end of the world. The fact that the cataclysm is never actually explained and that we do not even know how much time has passed since it happened, provides the reader with a feeling of uncertainty and confusion. This is highlighted by the fact that neither of the main characters has a name. By presenting the main characters as unnamed persons, the author could be trying to imply that they could be any of us, creating in this way a narrative confusion. Dialogues are sparse, direct, with short sentences and with no

referent, so the reader is left thinking: “Who is talking?” This forces readers to go over the same paragraph more than once just to avoid confusion.

The stylish ambiguity that the novel transmits to the reader is not coincidental. It is meant to represent the same confusion existing within the world of the novel (unspecified cataclysm, unspecified time, unspecified setting). The father tries to use a map to guide their way, but human maps and territorial boundaries have become obsolete and are not of any importance any longer. In this world, characters tend to talk more in terms of food and warmth than to speculate about their exact location; they are involved in a process of survival. But everything is speculation and the characters feel lost. The world is now completely detached from nature, something that for romantic poets had been a symbol for comfort and harmony. Old values have no meaning anymore and, therefore, this loss of connection with nature forces the protagonists to feel detached from their own world. In a way, the novel features a representation of the dependence of humanity on ecological stability.

The book has been related to Plato’s allegory of the cave by several authors, Kevin Kearney and Carole Juge, among others. The former states that the novel shows an inverted platonic cave allegory, that is to say, instead of escaping the shadows of the cave to find the truth and the light that the sun represents, the characters in *The Road* are deprived of the above mentioned sunlight from the beginning and, therefore, they are going back to the cave, deeper and deeper, lost in the darkness. This is what the first scene of the book shows: the father’s dream and his son guiding him through the cave holding a fading fire. It is not a rebirth, but the arrival at the end of civilization (Kearney 2012: 166–68). As for Carole Juge, she interprets the novel in a more platonic style. She argues that “the Sun does not allow that final step of lighting things with the glow of truth, since it remains hidden, but the father and son’s wishes to see the sun again clearly reflect their desire to reach that final step, a safe exit from the cave” (2009: 21).

The symbolism of the cave is ultimately a representation of the return to primitivism that the unknown event that brought about the apocalypse has caused. When there is nothing to eat, absolutely nothing, the human being can become very dangerous: *Homo homini lupus*. Primitivism has taken over and it is devastating: it means a return to the old ways of living, a return to the necessity of violence in order to survive. All previous hierarchies and the status of

power have become now paradoxically “archaic.” But of course if you are not strong enough, you need more things apart from violence, as happens to the protagonists of the story.

In a subtle manner, the book shows a number of symbolic elements necessary to survive in such catastrophic conditions. In a way, *The Road* becomes a moral survival guide. This work analyses the importance the book confers to the two basic needs which appear to be necessary to survive in a post-apocalyptic world when you are not strong enough to face the violence of others: The need of belonging to a community (a tribe), with its own morals and perspective of the world, and its own hopes; and the need to stop looking at the world from parameters that no longer exist. In order to do so, this paper has been structured in two main parts, which correspond to each one of these two necessities.

The following pages are structured following the method of narratology for its textual analysis, and rely on a study of the importance of several themes in the novel.

2-A SENSE OF COMMUNITY: MORALS, SYMBOLS, AND HOPE

The most important issue one should bear in mind when considering the survival elements in McCarthy's *The Road* is that the characters are left in a world from which they feel completely detached, so it is no surprise that the first thing they would unconsciously look for is a new sense of community. In a world that has been brought back to primitivism, animal law, violence and tribal customs, father and son (as weak characters unable to survive on cannibalism and violence) must adapt to the new rules and reinforce their own small community, a “tribe” of two which is based on their own morals. In this respect, it is the father who provides his son with their ethics, which consist of a binary vision of the world in which one can only find two kinds of people: the good and the bad guys. This is to say, cannibals and non-cannibals. Father and son try to reinforce their humanity by refusing to eat human flesh. It is a clear premise in the book and in my opinion, it has no sense: “We are better because we do not eat human flesh.” In a world that has been devastated, with no vegetation, or animals, there are only two ways to survive: either by feeding on the remains of the dying civilization, or by succumbing to cannibalism. The second option is better than the first one because sooner or later there will be nothing left from that civilization, something that the book makes clear more than once. The

character's stubbornness not to succumb to cannibalism condemns them to death. Even if we think that it is atrocious because of the sophistication of it in the story: cannibals in the novel eat their victims gradually, cutting members from them and allowing them to live on so that their flesh stays fresh till the end. It is the fact that such atrocity is necessary to survive that makes it more disgusting and horrid.

Obviously, the father has its own view on the matter and, as Arielle Zibrak highlights in her article "Intolerance, A Survival Guide: Heteronormative Culture Formation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*": "Humanity becomes divided between those who would do anything to protect their children—'I will kill anyone who touches you'—and everyone else—'men who would eat your children in front of your eyes' (77, 181)" (2012: 111).

This is a double-edged sword: on the one hand it allows the man to justify all his actions. Actions that in our present world would by no means be considered moral. For example, when the vagabond steals all their things and they catch up with him, the man forces him to give them not only their property back but also his own clothes and shoes. The father leaves him completely unprotected from the world, with no way to survive. In a way, the father is killing the man, a man who after all was just trying to survive without eating human flesh too, so he should belong to the "good guys" group. The kid sees this and tries to stop his father, but the father disregards him, which leads to a certain distancing between both of them:

Dont do this, man.

You didnt mind doing it to us.

I'm begging you.

Papa, the boy said.

Come on. Listen to the kid.

You tried to kill us.

I'm starving, man. You'd have done the same.

You took everything.

Come on, man. I'll die.

I'm going to leave you the way you left us.

Come on. I'm begging you. (McCarthy 2006: 275)

Sometimes it seems as if the boy follows a stronger moral code than his father does. After this scene, the kid enters a period of silence in which he barely talks to his father. When his father declares that he would have never killed that man, the kid rejects that idea: “But we did kill him” (278). By asserting this, he is making not only his father, but also himself responsible for the thief’s death. The quotation below exemplifies how the boy is also worried and interested about their future, but his father cannot even think of an answer for him, failing to fulfil the expectations of the father figure (see Snyder 2008: 82):

What are our long term goals? he said.

What?

Our long term goals.

Where did you hear that?

I dont know.

No, where did you?

You said it.

When?

A long time ago.

What was the answer?

I dont know. (McCarthy, 2006: 170)

On the other hand, the binary vision his father provides him with, serves as an excuse to blame and name those who eat human flesh as the bad guys. In my opinion, even if that is a tragic outcome of the human species, these “bad guys” are also victims of a system that is forcing them to turn to violence and cannibalism if they want to survive. Cannibalism is seen as nothing but the result of the destruction of a basic cultural prohibition, or rather of one that is no longer in force (Knox 2012: 96). Even though it is not mentioned openly in the book, it is also suggested that human beings are the ones to blame for the cataclysm that caused the apocalyptic desolation, which has most likely been the result of a nuclear disaster or a similar catastrophe. This leads us to the following question: are those persons who practice cannibalism in the book actually “bad” or even “evil”? Or is rather the “pre apocalyptic” civilized human being the one who is to blame?

It is also interesting to point out that the language used to describe the “bad people” is very much related to the world of violent ancient cultures:

The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites ill clothed against the cold and fitted in dog collars and yoked each to each. (McCarthy 2006: 96).

On the contrary, the man uses his gun to create a sense of civilized dominance and power. Nevertheless, it is ironic and strongly symbolic that right before he dies the man gives the contemporary gun he carries to his son, as a means to commit suicide: “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” (119)

To have a gun and bullets is vital if you want to survive in a world that has come back to a state of primitivism. In this post-apocalyptic world, the law of the “civilized” remaining guns has replaced the role that knives and swords had in primitive times. This also reminds us of western movies: the main characters, wandering from one place to another, bound to no fixed social structures anymore. Furthermore, as Jaroslav Kušnír, asserts: “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.” The father tries to play the role of the brave cowboy but he does not manage to live up to it. In Kušnír’s views, violence in McCarthy’s characters might seem similar to that of Faulkner’s, but there is a very important difference. “Faulknerian violence,” as Kušnír calls it, is related to social condition and the relationship of the characters to the land and history. Rather than associated with the past, McCarthy’s violence is associated 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” (Kušnír 2013: 73).

In her article, Arielle Zibrak also acknowledges the fact that the man sees “all good in the boy and all bad in the category of those individuals he identifies as cannibals” (Zibrak, 2012: 113). Thus, his son is elevated to the category of savior. He is not just a symbol of hope for his father because of his goodness, but because he himself believes in hope. Ironically, even if it is the father the one who establishes the binary vision of the world (good and bad guys), it is the kid that most of the times seems to be more ethical according to current standards. When the father pours water into his cup so that his son would have more cocoa, the kid calls attention to the fact that he had promised earlier on that he would not do that again: “if you break small promises, youll break big ones,” the kid says. Carol Juge claims that the kid is a platonic symbol of the sun, and therefore of truth. For her, the father is unable to get out of the cave and it is “obvious that the son has outshined his father in terms of philosophical advancement” (Juge 2009: 25). This is why the son survives in the narrative; his purity of soul is represented by means of his link with the sun.

The kid is the only one who still expects to find good things and he is also the only hope left for his father. It is only the kid’s personality that develops throughout the novel, not the father’s. At first, as Lydia Cooper highlights, he used to accept what his father tells him as unquestionable truths, but as the story advances, he begins to wonder about the potentiality of other possibilities. At his kid’s insistence, the father ends up truly believing that there are more good people in the world. As Cooper contends:

“There’s nothing in the lake” (17)—an assertion the boy does not question. Later, the boy suggests that other good people have survived (“What if some good guys came?” [127]), a question the father brushes off as unlikely at best. But this question becomes reiterated with increasing positivity. “Maybe there’s a[nother] father and his little boy” (182) the boy suggests, the declarative sentence structure telling in contrast to his earlier query. The father once again suggests the idea’s unlikelihood. The boy later insists, once again in a declarative mode, “There could be people alive someplace” (205), and this time the father answers affirmatively. “There are people,” he says, “and we’ll find them” (206). (2011: 230)

The son is not only a symbol for hope but also one for regeneration, since after all the kid transcends his father. Therefore, one needs both hope and regeneration to survive in such conditions, and the kid is both things for his father. All goodness relies on him. This is represented by the scene in which he asks his father about the mysterious little boy, and about who is going to find him, to which the father answers: “Goodness will” (2006: 300). What is interesting here is that it is eventually the kid who finds the little boy, which reinforces the idea that the kid epitomizes goodness.

The father’s hopes are focused on his kid and everything he does, he does to save his son. The holy nature of the kid is also acknowledged by the man: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke” (McCarthy, 2006: 3). In fact, when the father is in his deathbed and he sees his son bringing him water, he sees a halo of light all round him, as if he was the savior of the world:

He watched him come through the grass and kneel with the cup of water he’d fetched. There was light all about him. He took the cup and drank and lay back.’[...] He took the cup and moved away and when he moved the light moved with him. (McCarthy 2006: 296)

This heavenly imaginary is also closely related to that of the bright fire they must carry along their journey. Both lights, the halo and the “fire” they carry, are meant to represent the purity and goodness they, as good guys, have the obligation to embody. Also, from a platonic point of view, both lights are a representation of the sun that dispels darkness and shows the truth. In other words, fire is also a representation of knowledge.

Shelly L. Rambo asserts that “The elements of identity and mission are conveyed through the statements, repeated throughout: ‘Are we the good guys?’ and ‘We are carrying the fire’” (2008: 104). To help differentiate between good and bad people, McCarthy puts the emphasis on the task of carrying the fire, which not only provides one with light, but is also a symbol of purification:

What is it, Papa?

Nothing. We’re okay. Go to sleep.

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (McCarthy, 2006: 87)

The quotation above implies that the task of carrying the fire represents a protection from evil. It is also a metaphor of the struggle against the darkness, a darkness that has been created by the humans it destroys. As Lydia Cooper points out, the image of carrying the fire can be understood also as a reflection of Western complicity in its own destruction (2011: 221–22). The fire is presented at the beginning of the novel as a destructive element, judging by the ashes that cover the surface of the Earth. Also, as Collado points out,

[W]hen actual fire appears in the story it frequently does so manifested as the lightning and thunder that endlessly punish the survivors. After the presentation of the father and his son, the next character who appears in the book is a man who has been struck by lightning through one of his eyes (51). The event becomes a first warning that the longed-for luminosity can also kill. Too much light can make you blind. (2012: 61).

In any case, the task of carrying the fire is extremely significant, firstly because of its imminent association with warmth, light, the sun and therefore survival, which is what they are looking for; and secondly because of the classic understanding of fire as a symbol of civilization. This is in a sense ironic, because this symbolism is part of the inherited remains of a civilization that failed. The fire also symbolizes honesty and justice, it protects the protagonists and defines them, helping them not to lose hope. After all, the characters' main concern is not only to find a better world, but to improve their conditions, regardless of the world they are living in. In a sense, we could say that they also use the image of carrying the fire as a statement of mission for their "community." This is why at the end of the novel the kid asks the man in his new family whether or not they are carrying the fire:

How do I know you're one of the good guys?

You dont. You'll have to take a shot.

Are you carrying the fire?
Am I what?
Carrying the fire.
You're kind of weirded out, aren't you?
No.
Just a little.
Yeah.
That's okay.
So are you?
What, carrying the fire?
Yes.
Yeah. We are. (McCarthy 2006: 303)

The second family's man thinks this is a very strange question, but it is of vital importance for the kid to know if that community is alike to the small one he used to belong to. Carrying the fire in this sense is also a representation of purity, of goodness. The question the kid asks also looks to reassure him that the new family is going to be part of the "good guys," that they are not cannibals getting ready to eat him.

Likewise, language constitutes part of the notion of tribe as well. Different tribes have different ideas of reality, and they use language in different ways to communicate among themselves. This explains why the family the kid encounters at the end of the novel cannot fully understand what he means by "carrying the fire": it is a concept alien to their own community. In this novel, there is a word that particularly stands out as for the reaffirmation of the community the man and the kid conform: "Okay."

That's the best deal you're going to get.
Okay.
Okay means okay. It doesn't mean we negotiate another deal tomorrow.
What's negotiate?
It means talk about it some more and come up with some other deal. There is no other deal. This is it.

Okay.

Okay. (McCarthy, 2006: 176)

Okay means different things in the novel: it is used to mean reassurance, acceptance of a shared vision of the world and, when repeated once and over again, it fills the reader with a feeling of anxiety (Knox, 2012: 97). For Linsa Woosdson “okay” is “a primal response, useful in many ways as agreement, understanding with or without agreement, reassurance, and end of discussion” (2008: 94).

All these elements, the terms *good* and *bad* guys, *carrying the fire*, the language they use, become part of their new identity, their new religion, which is something necessary for a tribe to survive. The notion of tribe and family in the unity of father and son, of a man and his kid, is another essential point. We should not forget that the man and the kid have lost their wife and a mother respectively, and have been left almost with no hope. But they still have each other and they rely on that company in order to maintain themselves alive. On the one hand, because of the fact that they nourish each other when they are ill, and on the other hand, because of the moral support they give each other, especially the son to the father. Thus, the kid becomes a symbol of hope for the father. The man has the responsibility to keep his son alive.

This is so because the son represents the future, or rather, the lack of a past. In this respect, the reader is able to identify with the father, because the reader also knows the pre-apocalyptic world; the reader cannot possibly identify with the kid. There is a point in the story in which the man says that he (the kid) is not the one who must worry about the danger, at which the kid answers: “Yes I am. I am the one” (277). Even though neither of the two main characters has a name, the kid is able to choose his own identity; he chooses to identify himself as “the one.” The only form of address for his father is “Papa,” and it has not even been chosen by himself. Unlike the character of the father, the kid does evolve throughout the novel, and this is an example of his increasing awareness of the problem of morality. Of course, the first step one needs to take in order to face the problem of morality is acceptance, which is something the father lacks. The father does not recognize himself in the mirror, which indicates that he does not accept reality.

3-A CHANGE OF PARAMETERS

The collision between two worlds, the pre-apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic, creates a tension that needs to be overcome, and the way to overcome it is simply by letting go of all the things that are no longer necessary for the post-apocalyptic world. Memories are now of no use; they would only make the characters nostalgic. A change of the parameters from which one sees the world becomes necessary for survival, now that the world is so different. The set of parameters tackled in this section involve language (and therefore narratives and books), knowledge, and consumerism. These three elements have been historically considered necessary for humanity in order to achieve communication, respect, and happiness, in that order, and ultimately culture, civilization and better living conditions. However, priorities have changed in the post-apocalyptic world, and so communication must also adapt to the new situation. Respect is not achieved by means of knowledge, but by means of morality; and happiness means nothing when one does not have anything to eat.

As also happens to the landscape in the novel, language has been affected by the cataclysm: many words and expressions begin to lose their meaning or have no meaning any longer. For example, the kid is constantly showing an ignorance of animal life, probably because most of it has been wiped out from the Earth. This affects the communication between father and son, since very often the father cannot get his point across and needs to add an extra explanation to what he says:

I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies.

As the crow flies?

Yes. It means going in a straight line.

Are we going to get there soon?

Not real soon. Pretty soon. We're not going as the crow flies.

Because crows don't have to follow roads?

Yes.

They can go wherever they want.

Yes. (McCarthy, 2006: 16)

The man is very much aware of this change and of the ever-growing limitations existing in any attempt at linguistic communication. At one point in the novel, filtered by the narrator's words, the man even acknowledges his awareness of the problem:

The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (McCarthy, 2006: 93).

Laura Gruber Godfrey asks how is it possible for the father and his son to communicate to each other "when so many of the meanings of the physical and emotional world he knew have been erased?" (Godfrey, 2011: 170). This erasure represents the existent connections between language and reality. With no material referents, the signifiers appear to the kid as empty and dead as the world they live in. For the man, only remembrances of things past remain:

He sat by a gray window in the gray light in an abandoned house in the late afternoon and read old newspapers while the boy slept. The curious news. The quaint concerns. At eight the primrose closes. (McCarthy, 2006: 28)

The old newspapers do not provide any important information any longer, they do not fulfill any necessity for human survival:

You always tell happy stories.
You dont have any happy ones?
They're more like real life.
But my stories are not.
Your stories are not. No.
The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad? (2006: 287)

Likewise, the inability of the kid to produce happy narratives is an example of the extent to which language reflects reality and how old signifiers hold no meaning anymore and the signs of this new world are completely different. In the same way in which language has changed, so has the value of books. They are no longer relevant in order to survive, for neither meaning nor use.

The book, as the fire that they carry everywhere, is a symbol for civilization. However, it is not the symbol for any civilization, but for the lost civilization connected to the apocalypse. In a world where food is scarce, everything is covered in ashes and even a coke is no longer recognized, the knowledge that books may offer you is of little help:

Can you write the alphabet?

I can write it.

We dont work on your lessons any more.

I know. (McCarthy, 2006: 262)

Working on his lessons is not necessary to survive either, and so the kid sees no point in learning it. Similarly, his father carves a flute for him, and after playing it for a while, the kid throws it away. These episodes seem to endorse a critique of the culture and intellectuality represented in the pre-apocalyptic world, and of their uselessness when facing an almost dead, hopeless world. Too much knowledge can make you useless to survive in the new reality around you. The grounds on which human history and culture have been standing are now shattered:

Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at *the lies arranged in their thousands row on row*. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light. (2006: 199; my emphasis)

The human race has been trapped in textual life, as Borges metaphorized in “La Biblioteca de Babel.” The world was a library, but its books hold no meaning anymore. The only thing left to do is to let go of all these notions.

The importance of memory and its association to trauma is detailed by Francisco Collado in his article “Trauma and Storytelling in Cormac McCarthy’s *No country for Old Men* and *The Road*”: “The reiterative importance attributed to memories, the anxious conditions of his

protagonists, or the insistent intertextual links with biblical sources and writers like TS Eliot clearly point to a description of life in traumatized events” (2012: 46). The extreme effort the man makes in looking at the new post-apocalyptic world with the same parameters he used to look at the pre-apocalyptic world becomes the source for much of the anxiety that, according to Collado, structures the book.

Ironically, another factor that cannot survive anymore in the post-apocalyptic world is consumerism, epitomized by the coke can and the shopping trolley. It is ironic that father and son bond over an obsolete product that only holds meaning for one of them. For Brian Donnelly the coke represents the nostalgic reminiscence of the past world and a way to mythologize a relic: what if this was the last coke can? (2010: 72)

In fact, one may think that industrialization and consumerism are the main reasons that brought the cataclysm about. We should not forget the attacks of 9/11, and how the trauma related in this novel can also be interpreted as a maximized reflection of the collective trauma caused by the 9/11 attacks and their aftermaths. The presence of industrialization and consumerism is constant throughout all the book. Consider the following passage:

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. (2006: 6)

The things that can be seen in this landscape are either nature or things constructed by humans but both are equally destroyed by fire (charred, ashed, blackened, burned, gray things), especially the iconic aftermaths of consumerism represented by charred advertising billboards,

old carts and cars, and industrial waste. The fact that fire has destroyed everything is ironic, because of the meaning that fire holds for the father and the son.

Another relevant symbol is the shopping cart. It summarizes two of the issues this essay is dealing with: the uselessness of language in a world that is governed by demands of survival, and the critique of the American Dream and of the consumerism that nowadays is present in the very roots of our society. In the pre-apocalyptic world, the words “shopping carts” recall automatically the idea of food, of having a shelter to which you carry your groceries, of nourishment. They are “symbols of our power to maximize the moment, holding as they do not just immediate needs, but desires and potential needs” (Woodson 2008: 88). In the post-apocalyptic world, the shopping cart is used to help the protagonists carry the things they need to survive, instead of using it for purchasing goods. In a sense, the shopping cart becomes their home, keeping their few possessions together, such as blankets, food, water, binoculars, the map, toys and even some books. They need to keep it from thieves and the man has to repair it when it breaks.

The relationship with consumerism is remarkable in the sense that consumerist societies are characterized by having big enterprises and small enterprises, and it is the big ones that absorb the small ones, just as happens in *The Road* with human beings. As Donnelly contends,

The “super” market is a corporate cannibal that feeds off those weaker entities of the same species and, through the monopoly of supply and demand, drives specialized, individual traders out of business (2010: 71).

In the post-apocalyptic society, human beings have become the ultimate consumer good. The world has been divided between consumers and consumed, and, as Arielle Zibrak points out, the two main fears of the characters “center on two forms of bodily consumption: rape and cannibalism” (2012: 115): As the boy’s mother fears, “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us...” (McCarthy 2006: 58) This reinforces the idea of the book being a critique of the excesses of consumer culture. The boy is the one who realizes this and tries to act accordingly, and this is why he is the only hope left for his father and for the world. “Hope is nothing less than a radical commitment to mercy in a world where an act of mercy just may be a death

sentence. What is at stake is nothing less than the divine in human nature,” Lydia Cooper states (2001: 232). In fact, this critic explains how the boy might as well be a symbol for the Holy Grail, which is meant to be “capable of healing a world terribly in need for spiritual or moral renewal.” It is also interesting to add that the draft of McCarthy’s novel was originally entitled “The Grail.”

4-CONCLUSION

The Road is a survival guide; survival understood here as the means to find a way to make sense of the world and hope for the community. In Arielle Zibrak’s words: “To avoid death, one needs two things: a mode of survival and a reason to survive” (2012:109). One of the ways to make sense of the world is hospitality and kindness, which are presented by Lydia Cooper as the basis to counteract solipsism and consumerism (2001: 232).

The ending, in fact, shows an immense contrast with the rest of the book. Natural elements can be found everywhere, and this time they bring peace to the weary minds of the characters, something that had not happened before in the book. For Kušnír, the death of the father is nothing less than the death of individualism and a symbol for resurrection. Not the father’s resurrection, but the son’s, since he is now allowed to live another life with a different community.

[...] 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. (Kušnír, 2013: 77)

All in all, *The Road* is nothing but the story of a failure, the failure of humanity which brings a father and a son to face the apocalypse. Even if they try to create a new sense of community, how can just two persons constitute a community? In the end, the son ends up joining a bigger community with more chances of surviving than one comprised by only two persons. What is clear is that in a meaningless world, one needs to find a meaning, a symbolic

survival guide to keep on going, a meaning built up in terms of relationship not only with other humans, but also with nature, even when nature has been mostly destroyed.

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