The Road to Despair

Hope and hopelessness in the post-apocalyptic setting
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Abstract
This essay deals with the attitude relating to the portrayal of hopelessness in *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy (2006), and to the post-apocalyptic setting in general. Considering how the seemingly meaningless events portrayed in *The Road* can be related to the traditional Christian apocalypse, and whether it upholds or discards the values found therein is examined in the essay. Furthermore, after a lengthy analysis of how hope may not be so absent as one might believe at first glance when introduced to such a grim setting, the specificity of the place of *The Road* and its setting in the post-apocalyptic genre becomes the final part of the essay.
Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine the attitudes regarding hope and hopelessness in post-apocalyptic literature, with a focus on *The Road*, a novel written by Cormack McCarthy that was published in 2006. It is the intention to examine how the content of the book either reflects or rejects the notion of an apocalyptic event as something which leads to an often positive change, such as the possibility and potential of life after such an occurrence. Traditionally this would be considered from a religious point of view, as without religion it can be hard to find meaning in this kind of an existence. Through such an analysis, where *The Road* will function as a representative of a particular attitude, the specificity of mind-sets regarding hope and hopelessness in such a particular post-apocalyptic setting, where the world is damaged beyond recovery and we are more or less uncertain of how it really happened, are meant to be explained.

The notion of change and its consequences, tying in with either the survival or death of hope in such circumstances, is then to be examined, specifically in *The Road*, as well as in the general post-apocalyptic setting and genre. As change leads to fear, or rather that there is fear of change, its expression in literature relates to the text *A Problem of Perspective* (1973) by Raymond Williams, where the claim is made that every new generation feels unease about the time in which they live, and that the future that seems inevitable is one where the world changes around people and to some extent it appears almost as if an apocalypse is in the making. Whether or not this could be said to apply to *The Road* and whatever values or fears it might be seen to reflect, the perspective is an interesting one when looking at how people generally perceive change as something which does not necessarily bring with it positive consequences, and in fact produces attitudes that are in opposition to such a view. This certainly seems to oppose the traditional Christian view of an apocalypse, meaning what takes
place in the Book of Revelation, as an event which brings with it a change for the better, and is instead an absolute but lingering end brought about by an undetermined cataclysm, signifying only futility and emptiness.

A short comparison will be made with a similar work of fiction: *One the Beach* by Nevil Shute which was written during the cold war, where the actual fear of an imminent nuclear holocaust is reflected in the events described, and where death all around because of the effects of a great war, much like what could very well have happened in real life had things been different. Academic books regarding post-apocalyptic literature such as *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (2008) by Teresa Heffernan, and *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* (2010) by Claire P Curtis will be used to further clarify the state of post-apocalyptic fiction, and more thoroughly examine how it can been seen as an expression of change in one way or another. Other similar works of academic literature are to be used in order to further clarify and expand the analysis.

What is the significance of the portrayal of seeming hopelessness in *The Road*, and how does this state of mind relate to the traditional Christian apocalypse and the post-apocalyptic genre?

In this essay it will be argued that the traditional apocalypse has, in the case of *The Road*, been altered and even made insignificant. It is not the apocalypse itself that becomes relevant, but what comes, or rather importantly what does not come after it. Now it is the expression of hopelessness that rules, although it will be further argued that there still remains at least a trace of hope, as seen through the goodness of the boy protagonist in *The Road*, expressing the possible belief that humanity is not yet completely damned.

In short, the claim will be made that it is not the apocalyptic event that is significant, but rather what follows, and that despite all the misery there is still a glimmer of hope as seen through the rare goodness of even rarer people.
The essay will divided into three separate sections. It will begin with a generalized summary of the post-apocalyptic genre, containing explanations of the general traits of such works of literature and indeed of the traditional religious concept of an apocalypse. The next section will contain a detailed description and analysis of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, with a particular emphasis on the perceived sense of hopelessness of the novel as a consequence of there being no definite possibility for recovery. This seems to convey a profound lack of meaning, and it will be examined what significance such an attitude can have, and if things are truly as meaningless as they seem. The place of religion and spirituality in such a scenario is also of great importance in this part of the essay. With this in mind, the final section will examine *The Road* as a work of post-apocalyptic fiction, determining what, if anything, establishes its specificity and consequently its purpose within the genre. There will be a comparison with a certain aspect, namely the effect of knowing specifically what the apocalyptic event was, of *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute, with the intention of examining their respective attitudes towards what the apocalyptic event, or rather its aftermath, signifies, and the fear of what such powerful change brings with it. The intention here is to decipher a possible pattern which might be relevant to the expression, either consciously or unconsciously, of hope and hopelessness in post-apocalyptic literature.

**The Apocalypse and the Post-Apocalyptic Genre**

What is it that fascinates us about an apocalypse, a cataclysmic event of utter devastation? What is its meaning? What does it tell us? Within the context of literature, Mervyn F. Bendle describes an apocalypse as following:
Apocalypses are one of the oldest narrative forms, and they have informed some of the most imaginative and terrifying imagery in cultural history. Apocalypses provide detailed prophetic accounts of the end of the world, revelations of the end times, narratives that unveil how the final destiny of the world will be decided in a climactic battle between good and evil—in the Christian tradition, between God and the forces of the Antichrist (Bendle Paragraph [3]).

It is the final battle between good and evil, deciding the fate of the world. One might then ask what would come after it, if indeed it was the very end of times, if such a thing as an end truly exists at all, or if all there is can instead be considered a form of change.

Since the apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation, even before that as well, including the Norse mythological version called Ragnarök, many notions of its significance have been revealed. An apocalypse in such a sense, biblical or otherwise, is an event which is not meant to bring about an absolute end of the world, but rather a powerful form of change, for better or for worse. This idea of the traditional religious apocalypse is of great importance when considering how such an event is expressed through literature, and the portrayal of its consequences in the post-apocalyptic genre. As Curtis (2010) mentions, the very idea behind the post apocalyptic genre is that of starting over, of life going on even after a disastrous event, and perhaps even becoming better because of it (Curtis 2-3). There is an undeniable difficulty in finding any possibility of a positive future in a world that has been so thoroughly ravished, although the idea of starting over still seems to be very much a powerful one, especially when the circumstances have become so dire:

Starting over produces a radically different mindset than the mindset focused on the cataclysmic ending. Starting over always has the hope of something better; and the blank slate, which is of course not so much blank as it is destroyed, of the
postapocalypse can open myriad possibilities. Starting over can be the instigation for utopian imagining. The conditions from which the postapocalyptic account starts over is a kind of created state of nature from which and out of which we can think anew about where we are going if “we’ll not go home again (Curtis 4).

Similarly, it is explained by René Dietrich how a post-apocalyptic setting frequently works as a way to create a transformation after having experienced earlier destruction, where the world now needs to be remade. Such an occurrence becomes a necessity because of the fear of alternatively losing everything as a consequence of the devastating event which has changed the world (Dietrich 330-331). As seen through the Book of Revelation, the idea of starting over and remaking the world, in this case creating a new and better world, is in some sense confirmed, as the good and pious are, after the apocalypse has taken place, rewarded while the wicked are to suffer for an eternity:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.
And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.
And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.
And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.
And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death (Revelation 21 – 1-8).

Importantly, what this passage tells us is that despite the previous apocalypse there is no true end of all things, but rather a drastic change, in this case mostly for the better. Man, provided that he has been good, is allowed to live in a heaven created by God, where they will never again suffer or hunger or thirst. Similarly, those deemed evil, because of their actions, are judged accordingly, and consequently burn in an eternal fire. Still they remain, all of them, seemingly for all time because no end of time exists.

This is where the Biblical apocalypse becomes unlike the novel this essay will analyse, namely *The Road*. It works as an example of what Teresa Heffernan argues is a trait specific to the twentieth-century narrative, one which *The Road* seems to relentlessly prolong:

Yet this faith that the end will offer up revelation has been challenged in many twentieth-century narratives. The present world is portrayed as exhausted, but there is no better world that replaces it – these narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal; the end is instead senseless and arbitrary. There is no overarching critique, there is no cataclysmic destruction that promises to cleanse the world and separate the righteous from the damned, good from evil, and there is no resolution or salvation (Heffernan 5).
In these narratives, where no life can remain once the world’s energy has been emptied, the idea of “starting over” must consequently be abandoned. Such a view becomes naturally resistant of the traditional one, especially and importantly the apocalypse of Christianity. Being very much a product of a similar mentality, *The Road* is a literary work which to some degree appears to defy the need for meaning and an all encompassing and divine plan which tells us that everything will eventually be better. Its seeming lack of meaning is not a definite certainty, however, and the possibility of it, and of religion, specifically Christianity, being involved is to be further examined next.

**The Road**

*The Road* is a novel belonging to the post-apocalyptic genre. The story is based around two figures, a father and his young son, as they try to make their way south using the road that has now become extremely hazardous. Throughout the novel they face starvation and are under constant threat from the murderous and cannibalistic survivors of whatever disaster befell the world. The setting in *The Road* is a world which has been totally ravaged by a cataclysmic event relatively recently. We can safely assume that the planet would have looked much the same way our planet does now, only a few years earlier. Specifically what happens that alters it so brutally and radically, however, is never truly explained. The reason for the state of the world, grey and lifeless, barren and cold, is therefore mostly open for interpretation and it is likely that no character present in the novel knows much more of what transpired than does the reader. Be it a nuclear holocaust, a definite possibility, or a natural disaster or both, all anyone truly knows is simply that whatever did happen shook the earth to its foundation, and
made certain that it would never be the same again. The hopelessness of it all can be found in the misery with which the world is perceived by the father:

He walked out in the grey light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (McCarthy 138).

With such a portrayal of inescapable desolation, the only thing which seems to be an absolute certainty is the fact that life is ultimately doomed, and any hope there might be for eventual survival, even of the species, is being slowly and cruelly taken away.

There seems to exist an important difference between what is portrayed in *The Road* and what has been explained as an otherwise very prominent feature in post-apocalyptic fiction, namely that of starting over. There is an important distinction made by Curtis, where she argues that post-apocalyptic fiction can be divided into different categories, and where an apocalypse which brings with it eventually positive consequences is called a “utopian postapocalypse” and the scenario where there is virtually no possibility for starting over being called a “dystopian postapocalypse” (Curtis 6-7). Naturally, with this in mind, *The Road* falls into the latter category, where the idea that humanity, or even the world for that matter, might one day recover seems to be merely naive wishful thinking. What becomes interesting here is the hopelessness that comes with such a portrayal. Where there is a chance for life there is still hope, but when seemingly all possibilities of life being able to continue are taken away, no such thing can remain for long. Such a consequence appears to go against the idea that an
apocalypse becomes, in the long run, a good thing for humanity and for the world, where people have learned to live together because they have seen what happens if they do not. The world is destroyed, but there is no heaven to replace it, only what might now resemble hell itself, perhaps not a lake of burning brimstone, but a cruel and miserable existence nonetheless.

Hope and hopelessness in religious and godless contexts

Certainly there exists the possibility of interpreting the world in which the protagonists live as a kind of hell, or perhaps a purgatory. Thomas H. Schaub examines the possibility of such a spiritual existence: “The Road has the form of a spiritual journey, but what spiritual end may be reached — what Canterbury, Jerusalem, or Grail — in a “barren, silent, godless” world?” (Schaub 154). It is undeniable that its inhabitants suffer more or less every moment of every day, and if such an interpretation is to be made this could be a result of them eventually being purified after having lived through such horrors, or possibly as a means to eternally punish those deemed so wicked that they are forever beyond redemption. This idea, however, becomes quite problematic when considering the role of the father and the son and how they fit into the grand scheme of such an unfortunate event. Consistently throughout the novel the father tells his son that they are “the good guys”, and this awareness seems to be of vital importance to both of them in such a cruel world:

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.
And we’re carrying the fire. Yes (McCarthy 136).

This exchange happens just after having encountered and escaped from a number of cannibalistic survivors who locked their victims into a cellar in order to gradually dismember and eat them. After having witnessed this incident, the boy becomes terrified, and what follows is a repetition of what the father has told him before, most likely his whole life: that they are “carrying the fire”. The belief that they are better than whatever the world has become, or rather what people have become as a consequence of what happened to the world, is what keeps them going in the first place. They will not give up on their values because doing so means that they might as well already be dead.

Of course it is important to note that the father is far from blameless, and he is willing to do almost, a very important almost, anything it takes to keep the two of them, or most importantly the boy, alive. However, he holds on to his principles, and his primary concern is always to save the boy, even if that would be at the cost of his own life. His son is born into the world once it has already begun to fall apart. He has done nothing to deserve the life he has been given and is continually the conscience of the father as they run into situations which require them to either help themselves at the cost of others, such as not helping the imprisoned victims of the murderous cannibals, or to help others at their own expense, such as giving the
old man they meet on the road food and shelter for the night. In a world such as this, if there is a divine purpose that aims either to punish or to purify, it becomes difficult to find a place for these two. What could be punished that never chose to do any wrong, and how can something be purified when it is already the purest form that it can be? Would not such a hell on earth merely serve to break the boy’s spirit instead? Through a religious interpretation it is plain to see that neither the father nor the boy truly belong where they have been so cruelly placed, and any God who would do such a thing to them must therefore have a purpose in doing so, unless it is a God ruled by malevolence.

If this is the interpretation one makes it becomes necessary to consider the possibility of them, especially the boy, being there as a form of divine test. By being put through a tortuous hell the boy would be forced to grow stronger, or rather more resolute in order to remain, because if his will breaks he would not be true in the first place. Through this reading one might therefore see the boy as transcendent to the world that he is forced to inhabit, constantly tested in order to continually verify an inner goodness that never dies, even when the world itself can no longer hold on. There is repeated mention of his seemingly angelic nature, a trait which sometimes appears to even resemble godliness. The nameless old man they meet certainly seems to think so, and remarks on how terrible it would be to wander the road with the last remaining god (McCarthy 183). As Nora Kestermann remarks, the divinity of the boy represents a glimmer of hope in the eyes of the father:

[...] in spite of the protagonist’s withdrawal from man and God, he “conceptualizes the son as an icon of religious significance” (Wilhelm 136) and considers his divine redemption to save the son: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (McCarthy 77). Although the man cannot
determine “any hint of divinity in the barren landscape” (Tyburski 124), to him the son symbolizes the godly spirit and consequently, hope for the future (Kestermann).

The father needs to save the boy, because the boy is all the good that he can see, and therefore comes as close to being divine as anything might in such a place. The boy does undeniably represent a kind of goodness that is all but lost to the world, and being forced to live in a place where such an attitude would be most impractical can be seen as his ultimate test, and by extension a test of all that dares to remain good in the face of evil. In a world that has no hope, such innocence becomes worth more than anything, even life itself, because innocence and what it represents can fight against such despair. Ultimately, this is a potential explanation of why they would be placed, if indeed they were, in a context that so clearly has not been made for them. With that established, one can draw the conclusion that the idea of punishment for its own sake is invalidated, and they, particularly the boy, are there to be tested. This could perhaps also be meant to function as a test that is somehow intended to decide what worth humanity as a whole might still have left, as seen through the boy, and that if he fails morally, so does everything else around him. Naturally, the only way such an interpretation could have any kind of validity is if religion would be the main object of consideration when searching for meaning in an all but meaningless existence. Whether or not it does cannot be verified, although the possibility undeniably exists, and is therefore worth considering.

From the perspective of a religious apocalypse, that which comes after is never truly meaningless. There is no such thing as a definite end, because while the world might die the soul will forever go on. This is equally true for those belonging to the category of the wicked, as they too remain, being eternally punished for their sins. Unless the world portrayed in The Road is an actual hell found on earth, a very sad knowledge, or rather a feeling, hangs in the air, telling of what once was but will never be again. Everything simply died inexplicably, at
least to the boy, and it seems nearly certain that it will remain that way. This goes completely against the eternal existence, either in bliss or in agony, which is promised by the religion of Christianity. This form of life and importantly also death, when seen as being without religion instead of being defined by it, or perhaps long since abandoned by God, would be bereft of hope and of meaning, leaving human beings to fend for themselves, pitting them against each other; a battle which they are ultimately destined to lose. In such a world, where no God remains to ease people of their sins and help them through these harsh times, the boy’s life and the father’s, no matter how steadfast and good and moral, would ultimately be for nothing. There would be no divine test and consequently no greater purpose for their lives. The fight between good and evil, what is thought to be wrong and what is believed to be right, that merely surviving is not all there is to life and that some things should never be done, certain acts never committed, is all lost in time. Indeed, without the idea of eternal salvation at the end of it all, once their suffering is finally over, one might wonder why they would choose to live on in the first place, to survive without a cause, and not do as the mother did and end their lives before they became too painful to bear:

You talk of taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you’ll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart (McCarthy 59).
She could not hold on any longer, and all that remained was the hope for oblivion, for nonexistence, because the hope for anything more has been so savagely torn from her heart and her very soul.

Considering these two separate interpretations, one being a post-apocalyptic world entirely without God, and one as a kind of setup for a divine test, it would be possible to draw the conclusion that religion brings meaning and hope with it while the lack of religion leads to hopelessness. It will be examined, however, if meaning in some way might come from something other than God, even in such a bleak context as that found in *The Road*, something which can either be combined with or exist regardless of religion.

Finding hope in misery

Throughout the novel the father is exactly that: a father. He tries ceaselessly to teach lessons of life to the boy, no matter what happens, and through the horror that they are forced to endure, in order to make him an individual whose morals are not tainted by the evil of the unforgiving world around them. All this despite the wretched state of things, and despite the fact that most of the time they are slowly dying from starvation, he does everything in his power to give the boy proper values and to teach him to be a good person in spite of it all. Though such a thing seems relatively straightforward and logical, it can be very important to consider just why he chooses to do what he does. It becomes necessary to ask: why does he feel that it is of such importance to teach him values which will doubtlessly be detrimental to him in the world where they have to live? A very important, indeed perhaps the most important, example of such a limiting lesson is that of never eating other human beings, regardless of whether they would kill them themselves, if someone else had already murdered them, or if they died for entirely different reasons. There is an expression of extreme disgust
of the cannibalistic behaviour of others, where people are kept much like cattle in order to eventually be slowly mutilated and eaten, and women being impregnated so that groups then can feast on the newborn babies being cooked over the open fire.

As a consequence of their refusal to eat the flesh of the dead the father and child suffer tremendously, starving almost every moment of every day. What, then, makes them go through such pain for the sake of ideals that are, naturally excluding the protagonists, all but dead at this point? Firstly there is the immediate need to reassure themselves, to create something of their own to hold on to. Being “the good guys” keeps them from descending into the depth of evil that most if not all of those few who remain cannot help but throw themselves into. Secondly, such an existence, despite being one of near constant pain and fear, gives them hope, perhaps not of a future that exceeds tomorrow, perhaps not of a better world, but at least for themselves because they know that they will always be “the good guys”. If indeed they do have souls, and if the boy truly is representative of what goodness might remain in all of humanity, it is all that they can do to hold on and to suffer, if not for all of humanity, at least for the humanity that remains within themselves.

Remaining alive seems at times to be based entirely on instinct, where the urge to survive outweighs all logic and reason. We are left with the impression that some people simply cannot give up, while others, conversely, simply cannot go on. This, it seems, depends on different personalities, or at least differing capacity to hold on against all odds, as seen through the suicide of the mother. Instead of lingering in an existence that has no foreseeable future, she decides that it is preferable, indeed that it is far better, simply to die now and save herself the suffering: “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 and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant.” (McCarthy 58). The opposing personality to hers is that of the old man they meet on the road, who cannot give up no matter what:
Even if you knew what to do you wouldn't know what to do. You wouldn't know if you wanted to do it or not. Suppose you were the last one left? Suppose you did that to yourself?

Do you wish you would die?

No. But I might wish I had died. When you’re alive you’ve always got that ahead of you.

Or you might wish you’d never been born.

Well. Beggars can’t be choosers (McCarthy 179-180).

It would have been better to have been killed at the beginning in his eyes, but still he cannot bring himself to want to die now, even if he was to be given the option to do so. Much like the others, the boy and his father, he is trapped in a terrible place with no way out because of his powerful instinct to survive. When the suffering becomes far greater than whatever rewards of life might remain, should it not then be the time to die? A similar question is bound to constantly plague the father as he contemplates if he really could take the boy’s life if the alternative became too dreadful (McCarthy 120).

One might consider what they are living for, aside from the remaining alive itself, aside from being able to keep breathing. For them, what is life other than the fact of it? If they live without a definite purpose, do they truly live at all? The discussion regarding the ending, and opinions on whether or not it, and by extension the novel as a whole, is a positive or negative one, has been rather divided (Andrade 7-10). Depending on the ending itself, a conclusion could be drawn which decided if their arduous voyage was worth all the trouble, or if it was merely desperate and futile attempt to survive beyond their expiration date. Such a conclusion, however, is not available, and all that can be done is to offer further interpretation.
of what seems an unavoidably ambiguous ending to the story. I would argue that a definite possibility is that they have actually constructed a purpose for themselves, to keep on “carrying the fire” as a duty to themselves and perhaps even to more than that. By doing this they hold on to something within, something that is untouchable by any outside evil that could catch them and eat them. Perhaps that very simple thing, that fire within them is all they need to keep going, to find some manner of meaning in their lives which justifies why they have not yet decided to die the way the mother did, apathetically. While their fire is of a kind that cannot truly spread, at least not rapidly or very far, merely keeping it alive creates a beacon of hope, for themselves and perhaps also for whichever God might or might not be there to judge them and their actions when the journey has come to an end.

Transcending an evil world

The search for meaning in a meaningless world has now been argued to be either a religious test, where the protagonists are tried in order to prove their worthiness, or them finding their own meaning by stubbornly sticking to their principles and thereby becoming better than what the world has turned into. As a continuation of this, a further interpretation of the situation seen in *The Road* could be based on the very hopelessness which might otherwise serve as an opposite to the traditional Christian apocalypse, where the good are ultimately rewarded and the evil punished. Such an interpretation would have to make the claim that, in the case of *The Road*, humanity is defined by its fall to a much greater extent than it is by normal life without conflict. At the time of its death, or rather its dying, the truest colours of the face of humanity are revealed. What we see when this happens is a near all-encompassing darkness which devours all that once was, perverting it. Such is the true face of humankind in these dark times, where the weak are eaten and the strong murder each other just before a coming everlasting silence settles all across the world now covered in ashes. Because of the power of
such a violent and destructive majority all that is good, or rather what once was good, is forced to either adapt or to die. The devolution of humans into beasts is then nearly complete, and the impending doom is only made all the more definite when those awaiting it care for nothing save themselves and their immediate hunger to stay alive at the cost of others.

When this is the state of the present world, the importance of the father and his son sticking with their principles becomes all the more inspiring. Their constant refusal to descend into the depths of cruelty and cannibalism that most of their fellow beings have already begun to take for granted as simple facts of what remains of life turns them into an example of how perhaps there is still more left than that side of humanity which wants nothing but to eat itself until all that remains are its bones. Whether or not they manage to inspire others, indeed most likely they do not, their strength for not giving up and for keeping true to the very basic principles which the boy has been taught should not be understated. Without having been put into a position as extreme as the one which has been forced upon them, such a powerful resistance would never be able to surface to begin with. In being pitted against the unavoidable horror of the world they, especially the boy, become something greater than they ever could have had the world remained the way it was.

This position is very much possible to combine with the previously discussed interpretation involving religion, and the way in which they can be seen as being tested by God by being put into the position of this hell on earth in order to learn from it so that they can then be judged depending on how they acted before the time of their death. This is done by leaving them out in an unforgiving ruin of a planet to fend entirely for themselves, testing their values to such an extent that it seems almost impossible to hold onto them. Perhaps retaining such values in the face of a terrible opposition, where everything is close to screaming at them to give up, can become somehow synonymous perhaps not with religious values, but possibly spiritual and certainly good ones, connecting it at least metaphorically to
an individual fighting to keep their religion unspoiled. Ultimately their convictions, which are not necessarily of a religious or spiritual kind, though not opposing it either, are what saves them, or at least what separates them from the “bad guys”, as they reject their easy way out and choose to survive only in ways that will not damn them, even though they sometimes appear to already have been undeservedly damned themselves. Still, withholding their suffering and hardships might have instead led to absolutely nothing. From this perspective it would seem that it is only through pain and suffering that the measure of an individual, spiritual or otherwise, can be revealed.

**Evaluation of characteristics in The Road**

When looking at *The Road* in comparison to how the post-apocalyptic genre has been categorised, one must note that unlike many similar works of literature there is no possibility of the previously mentioned “starting over”, as explained by Claire P. Curtis, a trait which is generally of great importance to this specific genre. Without the possibility of beginning again, life as we know it is instead bound to eventually fade away, and no new society, good or bad, can arise from the ashes of the old. The portrayal of hopelessness has certainly been done before *The Road*, however, and is far from a contemporary occurrence. Indeed, as mentioned by Raymond Williams (1973), the expression of fear in literature, and the belief that the end, in this case an absolute end, is nigh has been ongoing more or less since the beginning of humankind. There is a constant belief throughout time that the age in which we now live, and the time in which they lived before, is the moment when everything will finally end, and that soon the world cannot hold on any more because of the imminent changes of the future (Williams 344-347). A key element of this claim is that of fear and how it makes people react in the face of unavoidable change. The future is coming, whether we like it or
not, and because of our lack of control and possibly of proper understanding, the literary medium is used as a means to express this fear and portray what horrible consequences our changing the world might very well have. Thus there is a very understandable reason for why in post-apocalyptic novels, and certainly novels of other genres as well, hopelessness is a relatively commonly used theme. As a subgenre it could be referred to as what Curtis termed, as previously mentioned, “dystopian postapocalyptic” literature, being purposefully without hope and a chance for eventual recovery. Talking about On the Beach and The Road, she writes: “These are still postapocalyptic works because they are set after the apocalyptic event. But they deny the social contract because there is no starting over that is possible after this event. Neither book focuses on the event itself, rather each explores the very meaning of the end of humanity (and in the case of McCarthy the end of all life on earth).” (Curtis 18). While the two novels share this trait of post-apocalyptic hopelessness, there is still a fundamental ingredient which separates them, specifically the purpose of the despair they so vividly seek to demonstrate.

What is a very important element in The Road, possibly the most important, when compared to other works of literature can be discerned when looking at another novel, similarly portraying a scenario that is without the possibility of starting over. As mentioned by Curtis, On the Beach, written by Nevil Shute was first published in 1957 and deals with the effects of a devastating war, everything being slowly poisoned by its radioactive remnants. This in itself manages, by contrast, to effectively illuminate what in some sense stands out about The Road, as the catastrophe in On the Beach has a very specific background, namely a shattering human conflict which rendered the world toxic. Such an event makes it clear what specifically is the object of criticism and what the author’s own fear is projected upon: impending war and its potentially world ending effects. It would not be farfetched to argue that such a novel is a product of the time in which it was written, as the Cold War between the
USA and the Soviet Union at the time would have been a major cause for alarm amongst the population of the entire world. The very real possibility of a third world war, and now with the continual development of weapons of mass destruction, would have been the cause of countless anxieties, being expressed in novels dealing with a very similar subject matter, in this case possibly meant as a warning of what was thought to come.

Such a specific expression of fear because of one’s contemporary situation is something notably missing from *The Road*. The apocalyptic event which must have been of immense power given that the entire planet has been made to die, nothing lives anywhere aside from those who prey upon each other, and they too are bound to die soon, is an event which we know virtually nothing about. The significance of that tremendous event remaining unnamed is quite noteworthy, as the novel consequently becomes much less an expression of any one specific fear, as in the fear of nuclear holocaust in *On the Beach*, and more of an examination of the effects on the human condition in extreme circumstances, both in the individual and in the collective. The possibility certainly exists, and is indeed hinted at, that here too a nuclear holocaust has taken place, although it might only be a partial cause, and in the end it really makes little difference what it was specifically (Edwards 56). The cause of the destruction ultimately matters far less than its consequences. Even so, attempts could be and have been made to find a possible connection between the event and actual events that are happening, or have happened, in the world:

[...] there are causes aplenty—the dystopian sensibility which has informed the nation’s imaginative consciousness in the aftermath of September 11th, the sorry mess of a war in Iraq which constitutes a grim episode in the history of American exceptionalism, the spectre of global warming and ecological disaster, and the implications of economic globalization and trans-nationalism (Walsh 48).
These are several current happenings which are said to be potential inspirations for writing *The Road*, explaining how it could be possible that McCarthy might have been inspired by the troubles of the modern world. Regardless of any such speculation, however, I would argue that it is not an exterior force or occurrence or fact of contemporary life onto which fear is projected in *The Road*, but rather it is the extreme capacities of human beings themselves that becomes the object of both fear and of admiration. What human beings are capable of becoming is of far greater importance in such a situation, where knowledge of the cause is so limited, than whatever apocalypse brought them to that point. Its greatest significance is that, regardless of what truly happened, a situation was created that provoked a drastic change in people, mostly for worse, but sometimes also for the better. This change in itself and the adaptation of human behaviour is then what truly matters, and ultimately what *The Road* touches upon, using the post-apocalyptic setting as a means to demonstrate what humanity can become if the circumstances demand it.

**Conclusion**

So then, what is the significance of the attitude towards hopelessness in *The Road*, and how does this state of mind relate to the traditional Christian apocalypse and the post-apocalyptic genre? It has been the purpose of this essay to analyse a variety of different interpretations which examine how the seemingly hopeless attitude of the novel might be seen as something more than just what meets the eye at first glance.

The post-apocalyptic genre is based on the idea of life after a cataclysmic event, something which virtually destroyed what was so that something new can come of it. The Christian apocalypse found in the Book of Revelation ends with the good being rewarded and
the wicked punished, but they live on in a new world, forever. The idea of an ending, something after which there is no more life, no starting over or rebuilding or transcending the suffering, but just to die is one that *The Road* brings forth, effectively contradicting the biblical apocalypse.

At first glance there seems to be no meaning, no purpose for the poor survivors, although they still seem to create some manner of purpose for themselves. The journey could be seen as a divine test, where good is tested by being forced to endure in an evil world full of evil people, essentially a purgatory or a hell on earth, and the boy being representative of all that still has worth within humanity. Without religion, they are doing nothing other than extending their miserable existence in a hopeless world. Still, their values keep them alive, and though perhaps they are not practical, they need them badly, because without them their fire is extinguished. Ideals will save the humanity within them, reassuring them that hope not for the future but for themselves will never die, and this is why they choose to live on at all. Without having been forced to live in such dire times, the goodness in them, most of all in the boy, could not have flourished in the way that it now has to. The conflict between the good and the evil is needed, or that which is good cannot shine bright enough, its fire insufficiently intense. Only through suffering can they truly display the truth of that goodness, when they refuse to give up in spite of it all.

In *The Road* there is no detailed mention of the apocalyptic event which leads to our doom. What happened is simply not important, but the fact that it did happen, and what comes after it is what matters. The novel examines humanity in various forms, and how the human spirit, with or without religion, can become either twisted and ugly, or innocent and pure. These extremes are the consequences of the change which the apocalypse of *The Road* brought with it, an apocalypse unlike the biblical one, where the good are punished either
because God does not exist or does not care, or because it is the only way that it can remain, by punishing it for its own sake.

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