

What Do We Become when almost All the Known World Disappears?

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The most impressive aspect of the post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy is not so much the global destruction of life on Earth, or the devastated landscape through which the road from the book's title passes, and along which the man and the boy travel south, two of the small number of last remaining living creatures on Earth. The most impressive aspect is the contrast between the global devastation, on the one hand, and the tenderness of the discussions between the man and the boy, on the other.

The Road is a dark, terrifying novel. With nights that sink into complete and utter darkness. With days which are grey, opaque, cold, with permanent clouds that cannot be pierced by the sun's rays. The phenomenon is a result of an apocalyptic event which had happened about a dozen years before the events taking place in the novel, and which is occasionally remembered by the main character. The apocalyptic event – that has brought death to the animals and plants, and caused fires raging for days in the cities – remains unnamed.

"What do we become when the natural places and non-human beings, so intimately linked to our own evolutionary and cultural history, disappear or are irrevocably altered?" (Fetherston 100) Rachel Fetherston asks in her essay concerning ecological posthumanism.

A similar question permeates *The Road*: what do those few survivors become when almost all life around them disappears? The most probable result is that, in order to survive, they will attack before being attacked, they will kill before being killed. *The Road*, however, leaves a possibility for choice. The man and the boy attempt to survive without killing anyone in a world that does not offer conditions for survival. All their human wishes, ambitions, activities, needs are extremely reduced, except for their mutual love and closeness. That can be seen in all the dialogues between the man and the boy, such as here, when the boy asks the man:

*"[...] Can I ask you something?
Yes. Of course you can.
What would you do if I died?
If you died I would want to die too.
So you could be with me?
Yes. So I could be with you.
Okay." (McCarthy 7)*

These honest conversations have the effect of shock and light in the monotonous gray and wearisome atmosphere on the deserted asphalted road and the dead trees surrounding it, among which the man and the boy move in an attempt to hide from the surviving aggressive gangs.

All conversations and questions of the child faithfully reflect its age, during which the boy still believes in goodness and altruism despite the great trauma he is surrounded by. However, this is not naively presented: the child is often terrified, and the values that he cherishes, especially his honest wish to help others, are also a result of his upbringing, and not only innate characteristics.

The man and the boy are always starved, although the man carefully distributes the food that they occasionally come across – cans of dried fruit or beans, all with dates that have expired long ago, yet the sole sources of calories that save their lives. When they accidentally find a closed can of Coca Cola, also with an expired date, the man gives it to the child:

*“What is it, Papa?
It’s a treat. For you.
What is it?
Here. Sit down.
[...]
It’s really good, he said.
Yes. It is.
You have some, Papa.
I want you to drink it.
You have some.” (13)*

Whenever they sit down to eat, they always have this kind of a conversation. The father is always trying to give the boy a larger part of the food, and the boy never wants to eat more than half, insisting that his father would eat an equal share.

This love and care are directly contrasted with the much more frequent and much more probable way of behavior during complete lack of food: the gangs from which the man and the boy are hiding among the dead trees kill and eat the people they come across. The boy knows this, and to him it seems much more terrible to turn into a cannibal than to die. The father constantly assures him that they are carrying the fire – a metaphor that the child connects to goodness – and that they would never become cannibals. Indeed, this idea and value is fully integrated into the character of the child. The boy gives a can of their scanty food reserves to an elderly man on the road, and tries to persuade his father to give food even to a person who had previously tried to rob them.

Nevertheless, McCarthy’s *The Road* is not a naive vision of what we will become when all that is recognizable to us disappears. The most probable scenario is that the end of the resources will mean an end to solidarity and empathy, and domination of the ruthless fight for survival. Even in such conditions, however, there is a choice: love and altruism are possible, even when they harm the chances for survival.

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the protagonist Winston Smith remembers how, when he was a child and they had nothing to eat, his mother hugged tightly his baby sister, who was starved, although this act changed nothing – it did not decrease their hunger, it did not prevent their death. However, Winston contemplates regarding his mother, “it would not have occurred to her that an action which is ineffectual thereby becomes meaningless. If you loved someone, you loved him, and when you had nothing else to give, you still gave him love” (172). That is essentially the idea of *The Road* as well – the goodness of the child and the love between the father and the child may be ineffectual, but that cannot make them meaningless.

Works cited

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