

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

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Abstract:

*Literature speaks through symbols. Writers use it to convey their ideas in a powerful and strong way. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* takes place at the end of journey and not before or during the journey. The novel portrays a man and his son seeking to survive from the remnants of the world after an indefinite cataclysmic event. There is nothing left out: no society, no food, no animals, no shelter, and no hope. Many readers will question why a person would wish to continue to exist under such situations? Although that question might be post-apocalyptic, one can always ask: Is there anything that makes human life precious and meaningful? The novel provides answers to these questions. But these answers are paradoxical. The reader is left with powerful arguments for both life and death. In this context life and death stand as symbols of hope and despair: In *The Road*, there is constant conflict between hope and despair. Nevertheless, the novel makes it clear that faith is no easy choice. This article will throw light on the significance of Christian imagery in the novel, focusing on the symbolic dimensions of fire and darkness.*

Keywords: *Cormac McCarthy, Christian imagery, fire, darkness, struggle, catastrophe, paradox, atheism.*

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is a work submerged with Christian imagery, as can be seen in the frequent motifs of fire and darkness. Fire is an intricate and an ambiguous symbol, both in the novel and in Judeo-Christian tradition. Fire has obvious negative associations of hellfire and the fires of lust. For example, in the *Old Testament* God Himself is described as a “consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24, KJV). In that context, fire is a purifying force. In *The Road*, fire is most frequently characterized as something vicious. The original disaster that wiped out civilization clearly involved fire. The boy and his father come across the remains of “the dead...half-mired in the blacktop” (McCarthy 203) and the remains of people who literally sank into the molten road. When the boy asks why they didn't leave the road, his father tells him they couldn't because “Everything was on fire” (204). Later, they come across a coastal city in which “melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake” (291). The fiery character of the earth's destruction is resonant of the fury of God, as presented in various incidents from *The Bible*. In the book of Revelation, the “fire of the altar” is cast onto the earth, (Rev 8:5) which burns up “the third part of trees” and “all green grass” (Rev 8:7), while in the book of Genesis, Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed by “brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven” (Gen 19:24). In *The Road*, fire has been accountable for anguish even after the catastrophe. The man refers in passing to the fact that there are “No more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought the blood cults must have all consumed one another” (McCarthy 15). Balefire is an archaic term referring to a beacon or funeral pyre; but it also suggests “baleful” and Baal, the name given to a number of gods worshipped in pre-Christian times. The priests of Baal are referred to more than once in *The Bible*, burning incense in order to worship their god (2Kings 23:5) and being defeated by the prophet Elijah. One of the names given to the Devil in the Christian tradition Beelzebub (“Lord of the Flies”) is derived from the word Baal (“Lord”). The brief reference to blood cults in the novel could be taken to indicate that humanity has been punished for its worship of pagans, a recurrent theme in the *Old Testament*. However, the cults sprang up in response to the destruction of the earth, rather than causing it. The man remembers:

[P]eople sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road (3233).

At first, people tried to help one another. It is only as time passes, and food becomes scarce, that the bonds which unite people together break apart completely. The fire on the ridges here must be the balefires started by the blood cults, which must also be responsible for the “deranged chanting” (32). Just before this above passage it is mentioned that there are no longer any “god spoke men” (33) on the road, and that they have taken the world with them. This might be taken as a hint, as one critic proposes, that the religious strife is responsible for “destroying the world” (Gen 2:7), but there is a little less in the novel to suggest this. The statement about the “god spoke men” (33) could imply that the truly godly and the truly good have all been killed, perhaps by worshippers of pagans. The cruelty described here people impaled on spikes is reminiscent of the late medieval and early modern era in Europe, a time when religious persecution was intense and violent.

The effects of walking in darkness are pronounced, even on a good man like the protagonist of the novel. At one point, when the man wakes up in the night:

[H]e rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance... To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness... Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the grey pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must (14).

McCarthy's intriguing adjective “autistic” (14) suggests the difficulty of interpersonal relations in this dark new world. The word “fall” (14) in this passage can be connoted with the fall of man, the loss of the prelapsarian state of innocence described in “Genesis”, which is analogous to what has happened to the world in the novel: there has been a second fall from grace. The passage suggests that the collapse of the society, which happened suddenly, like a fall, was preceded by a slower decline perhaps decline in morality. But the other sense of the word “declination” (14) a term used in the astronomy referring to an angle measured in degrees suggests that this also meant literally and in reference to the man. The man can fall if he does not find his balance; he needs to be able to stand upright, and this is difficult, as he needs to use his arms “out held for balance” (14). “Upright” (14) therefore relates to the angle at which he stands, but this invites the question Upright to what? The obvious, prosaic answer is “to the earth” (14), but the man no longer experiences himself as standing on a solid ground he has stepped out into “nothingness” (14). His sense of dislocation here seems visceral, the gut-wrenching experience of having no fixed surface on which to stand.

Of course, the word “upright” (14) also commonly refers to a value based person. Interpreted from this standpoint, the man's question “Upright to what”? (14) suggests that the man needs some ground from which he can measure the morals of his actions. He identifies this ground as the ethical and physical centre of the universe both the stars and he himself revolve around it. This centre can only be God, a Christian would say, but God appears to have withdrawn from this world; there is only “something nameless in the night” (14). However, the man has not completely given in to despair. He asserts here that the universe must know that there is a guiding intelligence behind it. And this intelligence is a “lode” (14) literally a rich deposit of mineral ore, but figuratively a source of buried or hidden goodness behind the evil of the material world. The word also suggests “lodestar” (14) a guiding principle or a fixed point of reference in an uncertain universe and “lodestone” (14), a naturally magnetized mineral used in the first compasses to help guide travelers to their destination. The man can only perceive God in metaphorical terms, but he cannot doubt the actuality of a higher being.

It shows that even if the man's faith is shaken he still believes. At other times, though, he seems to lose his faith altogether:

He saw for a 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 (138).

Morality based questions are again linked to the physical functioning of the universe God's creation as they were in the previous passage. Instead of a lode or matrix which "knows" (138), the universe is only a "crushing black vacuum" (138): it shows emptiness, an absence of everything. This universe is run not by any guiding intelligence but by physical laws which are "relentless"(138), "implacable"(138) and, perhaps worst of all, "blind"(138). The man and his son are reduced to "hunted animals"(138), no longer occupying the privileged place accorded to human beings by the God who created them in his own image. The earth is "intestate"(138) meaning in the literal sense that it has not made a will, and therefore will not be (figuratively) inherited by the meek or the godly, who are nearly all dead. All this seems to the man, at this moment, as an absolute and an unbearable truth.

The man's struggle between life and death is a recurring theme in the novel. At the same time, his interest in religion is often rooted with practical concerns. At times, he seems genuinely believing in God, even when he rages against his Creator. Sometimes he despairs. Mostly he takes comfort in rituals, in order to survive:

He sat holding [the boy] while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them (77, 78).

In doing so, the man follows the advice of his wife before she committed suicide: "you won't survive for yourself. 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" (59). Both the man and his wife mention that the ceremonies or the ghost should be "breathed upon", recalling the passage in "Genesis" in which God breathes life into Adam (Gen 2:7). The reference to anointing also has religious connotations. Intense faith is required just to maintain the will to survive. The man's wife lost this will, among many Christian beliefs she may have had: all she hopes for is "eternal nothingness". The man, however, is able to maintain his faith, though not without difficulty. He does this, for his son's sake. Hence the man and his boy are therefore mutually dependent on each other "each the other's world entire" (4).

The Road is open to both hopeful and despairing interpretations. These contradictory interpretations bear close resemblance to the man's conflicting thoughts about God and the status of His Son. Walsh summarizes the three possibilities succinctly in saying that the boy "is God's word, the last god, or 'God never spoke'" (Walsh 344). The catastrophe that has befallen the earth could be the prelude to a new beginning which will be brought about by the man's holy son. The boy could be doomed, despite his holiness: this ending might be too final even for good people to survive. The bleaker reading is that the holiness of the boy could be a lie that the man has been telling himself to help keep them both alive. McCarthy's novel is not merely ambiguous in the sense of leaving a blank space which must be filled in by the reader; instead, *The Road* actively and forcefully pushes these multiple, mutually exclusive interpretations upon the reader.

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