

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: A Narrative of the Resilience of Humanity in the Post-Apocalyptic World

Steena B.

PG and Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* serves as a poignant monument to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of the desolation that characterises a post-apocalyptic society. McCarthy's narrative skilfully delves into the depths of human despair while simultaneously celebrating the enduring spirit of survival. The novel addresses themes of violence, love, morality, trust and the innate human drive to persevere. The research article analyses the characters' struggle for survival in a post-apocalyptic world. It also explores the complex coping strategies adapted by the father and the son, shedding light on their capacity to discover resilience in the face of adversity and optimism in times of tragedy. It also examines the profound impact of resilience, highlighting the characters' ability to withstand and adapt as a means of ensuring their survival in an environment devoid of any recognisable reference points.

Keywords: Post-apocalypse, survival, resilience, love, morality.

An apocalyptic event is a massive catastrophe that kills most life, levelling cities and buildings, and turning the world into a lifeless wasteland void of humans and animals. The post-apocalyptic literature is a sub-genre of speculative fiction characterized by taking place in a world after some catastrophic disaster or devastation. The main characters scrape a living in a world decimated either socially, politically, or environmentally, most often a combination of all three. (Stanton 1)
Post-apocalyptic fiction focuses on the aftermath of the world when it has been destroyed by a major catastrophe. It deals with survivors of the apocalypse, depicting how they cope with living in the new wasteland.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy follows the convention of the post-apocalyptic genre, which chronicles the end of the world. However, the cause of the apocalypse remains obscured, and the only information given in the text is: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (54). The novel depicts the world a few years after the event when the collapse of the biosphere is starting to become apparent. It is set in a bleak, post-apocalyptic world where the sun is obscured, and the environment is cold, gray and lifeless. Everything is covered in ash, and nearly

all forms of life, including plants, animals, and humans have vanished. The world is in a constant state of decay. Cities have either been burned down or abandoned, leaving few people alive. All the trees are dead and colourless, and the wind moves ash across the road's surface. The novel centers on an unnamed father and his young son who are journeying through this desolate landscape. The man and the boy travel through the rough terrain of the southeastern United States in search of warmth after some unspecified catastrophe.

They passed through the city at noon of the day following. He kept the pistol to hand on the folded tarp on top of the cart. He kept the boy close to his side. The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. (10- 11)

These lines capture the physical and symbolic decay of the world. This portrays the destruction of nature and civilization. The father and son's journey through this desolation underscores the futility of their struggle, as everything around them crumbles. Wherever they go, the father and the son can see chaos, death, fear, and destruction. The conditions they face are unforgiving: rotted corpses, landscapes devastated by fire, abandoned towns and houses.

In this harsh, lonely world, the man and the boy live with a constant alertness, keeping the pistol on them at all times. They are travelling south down the road to escape the coming winter. The whole landscape is dead and empty, and the man and the boy have only each other. The earth lacks an ecosystem and is in a state of entropy, with the winters getting deeper, the sun obscured, and hardly any living plants or animals left: "The land was gullied and eroded and barren. The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes. Middens of anonymous trash. Farmhouses in the fields scoured of their paint and the clapboards spooned and sprung from the wallstuds" (189).

The man's primary goal is to keep his son safe and guide him towards survival, while the boy represents innocence and hope. They are constantly on the move, pushing a shopping cart filled with their meager belongings, searching for food and shelter. Along the journey, the father and the son face numerous challenges including starvation, harsh weather and encounters with other survivors who have turned to violence, cannibalism and brutality. Trust is almost non-existent, and the few people they meet pose significant danger. The father is often worried, trying to protect the boy from these threats.

The father and the son travel southwards, hiding from other people, as violence is

rampant and cannibalism is widespread. The society is reduced to bands of marauding survivors, road agents, or single travellers who hide from one another for fear of being captured, murdered, and then devoured. Despite the sense of impending doom, the father and the son continue to trudge on, starving and bedraggled, hoping for warmth in the south. Their possessions (a toy truck, an incomplete pack of cards, a butane lighter, a pistol, a tarp, binoculars, and some canned food) were pushed down deserted highways in a grocery trolley with a motorcycle mirror attached to the handle. They encounter numerous horrors including mummified corpses everywhere, dead bodies stuck in the molten asphalt of the road, a dried human head under a cake bell, a half-eaten newborn infant, and a cellar full of naked people who are used as food for those who captured them.

In Joseph Carroll's classification, survival arouses avoiding predators, obtaining food, seeking shelter, and defeating enemies (Gottschall et al. 89). The father and the son in *The Road* are trying to achieve all of these goals. In this instance, the predators are groups of cannibals, to whom they may fall as prey and be consumed. The two of them are constantly hiding from others. They seek loneliness and isolate themselves from others. The apocalypse has transformed the survivors into desperate bandits who eat people, and the father frequently emphasizes that they are different from the others because they are the good guys and the other survivors are terrible, therefore they avoid them. They use binoculars to look around for smoke or movement, and they flee and hide at the first sign of human presence. The man carries a pistol with only two bullets, which he uses to defend his son against the marauders' band. Due to a lack of plant growth, sustenance is obtained by scavenging canned food from abandoned houses or stores. Starvation is prevalent, and food and shoes become the most wanted resources: "Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food" (16).

In terms of shelter, they spend most of their days outside, either walking or resting by the fire, covered with a tarp, despite the increasing cold and frequent rain. They sleep with campfires burning all night and wrap their feet to walk through the snow. The only respite comes when they discover a bunker stocked by preppers who had anticipated a disaster. They get the opportunity to sleep in beds, eat a lot of canned food, and take a decent bath there.

McCarthy has shed light on survival tactics employed by the characters in different scenarios. The post-apocalyptic accounts tell the saga of survival in a world that fits the description of a wasteland. These ends of the world narratives depict a world where the instinct of self-preservation drives the actions of the characters. The instinct

for survival can be defined as the inherent capability to act in a manner that ensures one's survival. This instinct fosters adaptation among the living organisms so that the continuation of existence can be ensured. Saving one's life in difficult times is commonly referred to as survival. However, surviving in a post-apocalyptic world is not limited to the physical wellbeing of an individual, it extends to the optimum functioning of mental and psychological aspects of one's mind. As the survival instinct is an innate ability, it is just human nature to go to any lengths to ensure their continued sustenance.

The characters of a post-apocalyptic novel have to undergo countless physical as well as mental struggles to merely survive the harsh surroundings. In *The Road*, the father and his son undergo such experiences that take a toll on their mental well-being. In order to keep themselves sane, the man and the boy engage in various activities that provide them an escape from the grim reality and also aid in preserving their sense of identity. One way in which they managed to escape reality is through play. On his excursions to find food and other necessities, the man tried to find toys for his son. On one such excursion, he found a toy truck, which the boy loved to play with; the boy made roads over the ashes with a stick on which "the truck tooled along slowly. He made truck noises" (62). His play also distracts the man from reality. Thus, the characters indulge themselves in leisurely activities despite the grim circumstances, implying the necessity of mental rejuvenation in order to keep their spirit alive.

In a post-apocalyptic world, there is a rampant scarcity of resources. With the collapse of large-scale agriculture and the destruction of other means of production, the survivors have a limited supply of the things essential to their survival. During such times, an important strategy of survival employed by the inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic world is scavenging. In *The Road*, McCarthy depicts the survivors visiting the ruins of grocery stores, houses, farmhouses, gas stations, and other similar buildings in search of essential items such as clothes, blankets, canned foods, tarps etc. On one such scavenging hunt, the father and son find "some utensils and a few pieces of clothing. A sweatshirt. Some plastic they could use for a tarp" (87). They store whatever they find in their cart to ensure their sustenance.

In a post-apocalyptic society, after the collapse of all the social and economic arrangements, it is impossible to find appropriate and required sources to fulfill human needs for survival, humans are forced to live on the leftovers of the preceding era. Not only do these remains act as the reminders of the preapocalyptic life, they are also the storehouses of the important resources for the survivors. The characters of *The Road* understand the value of items in the broken world such as warm clothing and canned

food, therefore they do not hesitate to collect them while scavenging the ruins.

Fire is very important for the survival of humans. It serves many significant purposes for humans, including making food digestible, providing warmth in cold weather, and keeping predators away. The importance of fire for human existence is highlighted in *The Road*, where the surroundings are dark and cold. The inhabitants rely on fire for providing them warmth, being a source of light during the blinding nights, and making food safe to consume. The phrase “no smoke, no movement of life” (82) stands true as the presence of fire is the proof of somebody’s existence in the context of the post-apocalyptic world presented in the novel. Fire also holds a symbolic importance in the novel. It is used as a symbol for hope, endurance and adhering to morality in challenging times. The man is seen repeatedly telling his son that they are “carrying the fire” (87) to encourage him to go on during the challenging times. Apart from ensuring the physical safety of the survivors by enabling them to stay warm, cook their food and be used as a source of light, fire also serves as a symbol of hope and regeneration.

Weapons played a huge role in the evolution of humans and excelling in the art of using weapons improves the chances of one’s survival in the post-apocalyptic world as well. In *The Road*, having a lethal weapon like a gun, ensures that a person has a better chance at defending oneself from others. Beholding a weapon also gives a sense of power over others, as it may easily be used to rob essential supplies like food and clothing from them. The gun serves as a crucial tool for self-defense for the protagonists, a father and his young son. The gun symbolises their constant need to protect themselves from the dangers lurking around them, including other survivors who may pose a threat. In *The Road*, weapons not only serve the purpose of enabling a person to defend themselves, but also of taking their own life to escape a cruel death at the hands of cannibals.

The Road itself is both a literal and symbolic journey. It represents both despair and hope because it leads them through a dying world, but hope because it keeps them moving forward in search of something better. Throughout the story, the father wrangles with moral dilemmas. His goal is to carry the fire—a symbol of maintaining humanity, decency and hope—yet the harshness of their reality often pushes him towards ruthlessness. The boy, on the other hand, remains compassionate and frequently urges his father to help others they encounter.

In fact, this dangerous world manifests itself in yet another horrible scene in which human beings are trapped in their selfish attitudes. The people of this post-apocalyptic world are divided into two classes; “good guys” (81) or the hunted and “bad

guys” (80) or the hunters. The father and his son come face to face with the forbidden activities of the bad guys when they search for food in a grand house. Entering into the dark cellar of the house, the man finds “naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous” (116). Indeed, it does not take the father long to be fearful and highly suspicious of everyone because they have become killers, and he is unable to distinguish friend from foe. The various cannibalistic practices show the man and the boy that human connections are severed in such a post-apocalyptic world.

The father, as has been pointed out, wrestles with the aftermath of the violent destruction of his old world. He is always in danger, and there is a growing sense of death all around him. Indeed, the father awaits his turn to be swept up by the darkness and the silence of this new world. As the title of the novel suggests, much of the action takes place on the road, demonstrating most clearly how the road can never be taken as a permanent refuge; rather, it is only a means of survival. Indeed, on the road, the boy is only preoccupied with survival more than with imagining a different better future. Apparently, this post-apocalyptic vision is not driven by a utopian impulse. Rather, it is a bleak vision that never helps the man or the boy see things anew, a bleakness that is faintly mixed with hope that may turn out to be illusory. In a significantly titled article “The Road Through Hell, Paved With Desperation,” Maslin writes:

The Road would be pure misery if not for its stunning, savage beauty.

This is an exquisitely bleak incantation—pure poetic

brimstone. Mr. McCarthy has summoned his fiercest visions to invoke the devastation.... *The Road* offers nothing in the way of escape or comfort.

But its fearless wisdom is more indelible than reassurance could ever be. (E1)

Obviously, struggle for survival is a necessary aspect of predatory world. However, in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, survival is no longer a possibility.

In the end of their harrowing journey, the father's health gets worse due to illness, starvation, and continual exhaustion. Despite his worsening condition, he pushes forward for the sake of his son, determined to take him as far as he can. The novel culminates in the father's death. Knowing his time is near; he prepares his son to continue on alone. He tells the boy to keep “carrying the fire,” urging him to hold onto their shared values and hope. After the father's death, the boy is found by a group of survivors who appear more benevolent than others encountered earlier. The novel ends

with the ambiguous hope that the boy may find a chance at a better future with these people. Despite the overwhelming bleakness, the bond between the father and the son and the concept of ‘carrying the fire’ symbolise the persistence of hope, goodness and humanity even in the darkest times.

Through the novel *The Road*, McCarthy emphasises the importance of not only bodily survival but also the survival of human generosity and kindness. The journey of the father and the son serves as a powerful exploration of human resilience, love, and the struggle to maintain humanity in the face of overwhelming adversity. Their love for each other becomes a driving force that keeps them moving forward in the desolate world. Their constant search for food, water, and shelter, coupled with the threat of danger and the father’s illness, creates a relentless fight for survival. This ongoing search is a matter of life and death, highlighting the harsh reality of survival in a post-apocalyptic world.

Works Cited

- Gottschall, Jonathan, and David Sloan Wilson, editors. *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*. Northwestern UP, 2005, p.89.
- Maslin, Janet. “The Road Through Hell, Paved With Desperation.” *The New York Times*, 2006, p.E1.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Picador, 2007.
- Stanton, Nicholas A., et al. “On The Shores of A World Unheard of: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and The Move Beyond The Postmodern Condition.” Academia, 2011, www.academia.edu/1756733.