



Nature's narrative: An Ecocritical Criticism of the Environmental Themes in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

This paper examines the environmental concerns present in McCarthy's work *The Road* (2007) from an Ecocritical approach. The fundamental study question focuses on the depiction and examination of these themes, highlighting the important convergence of literature, ecology, and the complex connections between humans and the natural world. The narrative takes place in a society that has fallen apart, with the once glorious natural world losing its beauty. This forces the remaining humans to undertake dangerous expeditions in order to find food and resources. The father and the unidentified child traverse a dry, barren landscape, symbolizing the unforgiving truths of a habitat devastated by ecological degradation. This research adds to the ongoing discussion on the relationship between literature and the environment, as seen through the lens of Ecocriticism. It emphasizes the importance of comprehending how narratives both influence and are influenced by ecological issues, promoting a more profound awareness of this interconnection.

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Introduction

A style of new literary studies and cultural criticism in the field of literature known as Ecocriticism places an emphasis on the relevance of nature and aims to assess the selected novel from the point of view of an environmentalist. The study of ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary branch of study that investigates the relationship between environmental problems and a variety of topics that are encountered in a variety of fields of study. As viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, this paper investigates how Cormac McCarthy depicts a dystopian America in his novel, *The Road*, which was published in 2007. *The Road* is a narrative that explores the dystopian future of the United States of America. It is a gloomy and terrible story. The story follows a father figure and his children as they travel through a landscape that has been destroyed by natural disasters.

The world has been attacked by an unnamed calamity, which has resulted in extensive destruction and poisoning of the environment. The entire human population has been eradicated, and the only remaining members of the human race are a small number of individuals and a few dogs that have managed to survive. Particulate matter and dangerous particles are constantly present in the atmosphere, which is constantly surrounded by them. The humidity is high, and the temperature is fairly chilly. As a result of the disintegration of certain aspects of society, the natural world has lost its magnificence, and the few human survivors who are still alive are forced to travel the countryside on a daily basis in search of food. Both the father and the child, whose names are not stated, go through a terrifying ordeal in a setting that is arid and devoid of vegetation. Through the use of an ecocritical point of view, the major research question is centred on the depiction and investigation of environmental themes that are present in McCarthy's novel. In addition to this, the section emphasizes the significance of conducting research into the intersection of literature, ecology, and the relationships that exist between people and the natural world.

Ecocritical Study in *The Road*

A Brief Presentation of Ecocriticism A literary study that is impacted by an ecological or environmental consciousness is referred to as ecocriticism, according to Marshall. This is the phrase that is used to define the study of literature. The author uses a number of different approaches that share a concern for the environment in order to investigate the relationship that exists between literature and the environment (Glotfelty xix). A work that prominently incorporates the environment as a significant character, where there is a strong interplay between authors and the setting, characters and geography, and environmental degradation, is the kind of work that may be utilized by scholars and researchers with the greatest degree of success.

According to Scheese, the term “environment” refers to the non-human components of a location, which include things like soil, rocks, trees, plants, rivers, animals, and air, as well as human perceptions and alterations associated with those components. Environmentalism is a philosophical approach that investigates the metaphors and words that are used to describe the environment in order to achieve a more profound understanding of our relationship to it. According to environmentalists, human culture, and more specifically its literature, is inextricably connected to the external environment. This means that human culture has an impact on the natural world in the same way that the environment contributes to the formation of culture. This is consistent with the first principle of ecosystem ecology proposed by Barry Commoner, which asserts that “everything in nature is interconnected.” (Anderson 2020, Bi-fan 2015).

Sarver, along with other critics in the field of ecocriticism, acknowledges the necessity for literary criticism to address the urgent ecological problems that we are currently facing. Writing that acknowledges and places an emphasis on the interconnectedness that exists between humans and the life cycles of the environment is something that our experts need to concentrate on. In order to improve the effectiveness of our method, we should concentrate our literature research primarily on works that prominently include the environment. There is a widespread perception among ecocritics that the existing critique is extremely specialized, inaccessible even within the discipline, and generally divorced from the more serious critical issues that are confronting the modern world. Through their engagement in economic and environmental critique, these researchers hope to break free from the nebulous and generic nature of modern literary ideas about literature. In order to produce findings from studies that are more mindful and ethical, they make use of discoveries made in recent scientific investigations (Åström 2018).

In literary studies, there “must have been a shift in our focus of incentive from newness, or conceptual refinement, or perhaps even coherence, to a concept of relevancy,” according to William Rueckert. Critical theory must “recognise... our institution’s constrained humanist perspective, our narrowly anthropocentric understanding of what’s important in life,” according to others who have made this point (Laug 2019). One of ecocriticism’s advantages is the variety of literary criticism methods it provides. The variety of critical strategies found in ecocritical, though occasionally viewed as amorphous, actually reflects the many subfields found in environment (Wierschem 2015).

Nature and ecology relationships with humans in *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy is a contemporary American novelist who was born in 1933. He is well-known for his works, which typically present harsh and unyielding descriptions of mysterious parts of human nature. The vast majority of his novels explore the extent to which both the natural world and humanity have a negative impact on every aspect of human existence. These novels portray the connection between humanity and the natural world. On a regular basis, he concentrates on uncovering the hidden essence of the universe. He proposes that

people are always aware of the influence that nature has on their lives, and that this awareness manifests itself in the form of air, food, and beverages. The word “ecocriticism” was first presented in an article written by William Rueckert in 1978 and titled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Nevertheless, ecocriticism did not exist as a separate field until the 1990s, despite the fact that literary critics have been interested in the relationship between humans and their physical environment for a very long time (Volkman 370). In his essay William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as

the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years (Rueckert 107).

An overwhelming feeling of dread permeates the events that take place throughout the length of the narrative, beginning with the opening scenes and continuing all the way through to the finale. As a result of precipitation, the rainwater turns into ash particles that are completely saturated. The locations that *The Man and The Boy* travel through are revolting, horrible, and unattractive to an extreme degree. The gloomy portrayal of rural landscapes and unpleasant urban places that the world presents is as follows:

The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell (McCarthy 181).

Both the planet’s physical and moral systems are in a condition of complete and utter ruin. All of the plants and fauna have either passed away or are in a critical condition. Some of the few human survivors that are still alive participate in the practice of cannibalism. Moral decay and a deterioration in human values are the results of the fierce war for survival that people engage in. As a consequence of this, society reverts to its primitive state, with individuals, driven by their instincts, engaging in conflicts for food and competing for life, much like animals do.

Through his novel *The Road*, McCarthy focuses solely on the hostile relationship that exists between humanity and environment, highlighting the negative sides of this relationship. This is due to the fact that he seems to be warning people in the United States against always feeling comfortable and relying only on what is generally known as the American Dream, which has the potential to turn into a nightmare for the American people. Hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes are all natural disasters that have the potential to cause long-lasting consequences. These natural disasters can cause a considerable number of deaths and force a large number of people to evict themselves from their homes. Because of these natural disasters, people are forced to live in conditions and shelters that are less secure than they would otherwise be. Nature is portrayed as an antagonist in McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, as it persistently inspires fear and enables violence and malevolence to develop. Therefore, Nature is portrayed as an adversary: “murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (*The Road* 152).

Glotfelty draws attention to yet another ecocritical element that is introduced in the novel, which investigates the complex relationship that exists between people and the natural world. Through its depiction of a dystopian society in which the environment has undergone a hostile and dangerous alteration, the novel highlights the uttermost significance of the struggle for survival. Within the confines of this particular framework, the interaction between humans and the environment is marked by a large amount of strain and disagreement. The father and son are tasked with navigating a world in which the natural environment not only puts them in the greatest peril, but also represents their last chance of survival. The father recognizes the significance of the environment in the preservation of human existence, and he instils in his son the principles of reverence and protection of the environment during their lives together. He tells his son: “You have to carry the fire... It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.” (McCarthy 234). In this particular setting, the father emphasizes how important it is for the son to preserve the heritage of human civilization and to protect the environment that is responsible for its growth. The metaphor of “carrying the fire” depicts the act of conserving the knowledge and principles that characterize humanity, as well as the duty to defend the environment from more catastrophe.

In spite of this, the story also illustrates the negative effects that human activity has on the surrounding ecosystem. According to the novel, the tragedy, which led to the annihilation of the vast bulk of the human population, was brought about by the actions of human beings. In addition, it illustrates the consequences that result from the destructive interactions that humans have with the natural environment. Both the father and the

son are witnesses to a variety of environmental degradations, which include rivers that have been contaminated with chemicals and forests that have been completely destroyed by fires.

“He... looked out over the wasted country. The road was empty. Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds.” (McCarthy, 05)

The narrative looks into the effects that the deterioration of the environment makes on the interactions between people. Both the difficult environment in which the father and son live, as well as their struggles to endure and stay alive, have an impact on the bond that exists between the two of them. Within this particular setting, the natural world plays a significant role in determining how they interact with one another. The father recognizes the significance of the environment. “He knew only that his child was his warrant. He said: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke.” (McCarthy 4). Within the context of this contemplation, the father recognizes the significance of his son, viewing him as a treasured and heavenly presence in his existence. It is the man's contention that his offspring is his “warrant,” which would be a representation of his justification or guarantee for being. A final assertion that he makes is that if his son is not the divine word of God, then God has never interacted with humanity. Consequently, the father views the burden of protecting and providing for his son as a sacred obligation that has been conferred upon him by a divine power.

A terrible and alarming memory that haunts the Man is the suicide of his wife, who was unable to face the devastating effects that befell the environment. This is one example of the horrible and alarming memories that haunt the Man. At the time of the worldwide explosion, she was carrying a child, and the boy was delivered not long after she and the Man had completed their pregnancy. Ultimately, she gave up and took a bullet: “She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift” (The Road 94). As Andrew Hoberek notes, “the wife committed suicide ... not because she is a weak woman but because she succumbed to a deadening coincidence between the imagination and reality” (Hoberek 494). In the end, the mother's struggle is rooted in her inability to describe and comprehend the occurrences that are taking place in nature, as she navigates the line between her imagination and the world around her.

McCarthy's novel shows a dystopian future that is devoid of any optimism, yet the narrative's primary focus is on the relationship that exists between a father and his son. His great American nightmare, which is fuelled by love and provides people with hope in the face of misery, has been conveyed to us by him. The father and his son make their way through the ruins in search of food and a safe haven, all the while making an effort to defend themselves from marauding parties that have the purpose of killing innocent people. The only things they possess are a firearm for self-defense, a little amount of food, and the clothing that they are now wearing so that they can protect themselves. It takes more than just having a location to hide and a means of subsistence in order to be able to survive in the desolate landscape.

The absence of hope can also be fatal for persons who are confronted with extreme elements that put their life in jeopardy, such as extreme cold, excessive hunger, and violence. McCarthy conjures up a scene that takes place years after a catastrophic tragedy has occurred. Despite the fact that urban centres have been completely destroyed, flora and fauna have been eradicated, and only a limited number of people have managed to survive. The presence of winter is indicated by the fact that ash particles are being able to block the sun. An appreciable number of people have turned to cannibalism as a means of subsistence because there is a severe lack of food. Janet Maslin evaluates the scene: “McCarthy has summoned his fiercest visions to invoke the devastation. He gives voice to the unspeakable in a terse cautionary tale that is too potent to be numbing, despite the stupefying ravages it describes” (Maslin). The foreboding atmosphere that was experienced may be interpreted as a type of retribution against humanity. This is because the activities that occurred throughout the Anthropocene era had a negative impact on the natural world, which ultimately posed a threat to the living existence of humans.

Conclusion

A post-apocalyptic America that has been changed into a lonely and barren terrain is depicted in McCarthy's novel *The Road*, which tells a story that is both gloomy and horrific. McCarthy illustrates his incredible insight that he had regarding the future of the United States of America by depicting specific events in a horrifying manner. The unexplained calamity that has struck the world, resulting in extensive destruction and environmental degradation, is not something that McCarthy is convinced about identifying. Because of the significant part that the natural world and the environment play in the story, the idea of ecocriticism is valuable for the analysis of McCarthy's novel *The Road*.

Additionally, the atmosphere and nature govern the path of events and situations for the whole of the novel, and they exert an influence on all of the individuals in the story. The environmental modern movement of the 1960s gave rise to the school of thought known as ecocriticism. An initial focus of this movement was on a select group of big environmental issues and disasters, with the intention of recognizing and condemning the negative effects that human actions have had on the ecology of the Earth. The goal of ecocriticism is to investigate the influence of the surrounding environment on a piece of literature in more depth. Setting and ecological aspects that have a substantial impact on a narrative are investigated in this text. Within the context of the biophysical world, McCarthy's novel *The Road* investigates the process of knowledge and consciousness acquisition. When it comes to the study of mankind, McCarthy places a higher priority on the study of ecology and the environment. It takes a significant amount of time to travel across the region, which has been ravaged by fire, is coated in ash, is characterized by remoteness, and is littered with abandoned towns and dwellings. A pervasive sense of horror permeates the proceedings from the beginning to the end of the story, and it is present throughout the whole of the piece. There is a dark atmosphere that permeates *The Road*.

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