

“Because we carry the fire.” : An Eco-Marxist Reading of Cannibalism in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

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In his seminal ecocritical volume, *Ecocriticism: the New Critical Idiom*, Greg Garrard writes the defining ecocritical treatise on “Apocalypse” and its thematic implementation in literature ranging from the Bible to contemporary works of fiction and cautionary nonfiction. While Garrard makes a point of identifying literary apocalypticism as having been traditionally embraced by socially and economically “embattled” groups, there is no denying that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature have seen a surge in popular appeal over the past decade, as greater proportions of the global population find themselves battling socially and economically abusive hegemonic systems. As Damian Thompson writes:

Apocalypticism has been described as a genre born out of crisis, designed to stiffen the resolve of an embattled community by dangling it in front of the vision of a sudden and permanent release from its captivity. It is underground literature, the consolation of the persecuted. (Qtd. in Garrard 86)

While the purpose of this paper is not necessarily to make a case for socioeconomic or environmental revolt or reform, it is to take a closer look at one writer’s apocalyptic vision in particular, and trace his message of consequential apocalypse to its ostensibly causal roots in the current environmental, political, and economic practices of modern Western civilization.

Just as ecocritics have had a fairly easy task of drawing connections between economy and environment, so too does Cormac McCarthy in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road*. Although McCarthy does not draw an overt association between economy and environment, there is an implicit warning in his prose which points to distinct human drives which, if acted upon blindly, have potentially terrifying consequences. For example, the blind drive towards self-preservation (exemplified in *The Road* by rampant cannibalism), breeds resource-centered secondary and tertiary drives (such as territoriality and a subsequent drive for dominance within a territory), which eventually lead to socially and environmentally oppressive and abusive behaviors. It is this connection between our physical, organic humanity and our psychic, fostered humanity that is at the center of eco-Marxist theory, as described by David Pepper:

Marx recognized the priorness [*sic*] of an ‘external’ or ‘first’ nature, that gave birth to humankind. But humans then worked on this ‘first’ nature to produce a ‘second’ nature: the material creations of society plus its institutions, ideas, and values. This process, as Bookchin...stresses, is part of a process of *natural* evolution of society. (Qtd. in Garrard 29)

It is in fact this “second nature” which is so problematic in our own modern societies, and which becomes so problematic in McCarthy’s vision of post-apocalyptic America.

McCarthy’s vision shares a common thread with practically all other humanistic post-apocalyptic literature, in that he provides for a small surviving contingent of human beings—those individuals in this case *unlucky* enough to have survived an eschatological event (hinted to have been a widespread nuclear incident). But while post-apocalyptic in its storyline, *The Road* is technically an apocalyptic text, if we are to accept the definition of “apocalypse” as an unveiling of future events (Lawrence). Working from this definition, Garrard cites Stephen O’Leary, who accounts for two distinct thematic threads *within* the greater genre of apocalyptic literature: “...the drama of apocalypse is shaped by a ‘frame of acceptance’ that may be either ‘comic’ or ‘tragic’. The choice of frame will determine the way in which issues of time, agency, authority and crisis are dramatized” (Garrard 87). O’Leary continues:

Tragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice and the ‘cult of the kill’. Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not towards sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility. (Qtd. in Garrard 87)

In true McCarthian form, however, *The Road* defies a neat and simple characterization as a “comic” or “tragic” apocalyptic text. In fact, on a first read it may appear to be somewhat evenly split between these two extremes. Of course much of the text’s classification will ultimately rely upon what the individual reader brings to it; our particular classification within the realm of eco-Marxism will rely specifically upon considerations of economy and environment within the narrative.

As in modern life economic considerations typically take precedence over environmental considerations, perhaps this exegesis would be best initiated with a look at the socioeconomic mechanisms at work in McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic vision. First and foremost, we will work from an understanding that the text is structured with a basic underlying Hegelian recognition of “self” and “other.” The nameless man and his son are undoubtedly representative of what could be termed the “self.” On a very basic level, McCarthy portrays his protagonists as the “good guys.” After the father kills a cannibal in self-defense, the boy asks, “Are we still the good guys?” To which the father replies, “Yes. We always will be” (77). As McCarthy’s omniscient narrator appears to be in the business of documentation rather than deception, the reader has no reason to doubt that the father/son duo are indeed the “good guys,” and by extension can be reasonably considered to be the Hegelian “self” with which most readers would presumably identify.

So what individuals or groups would constitute the Hegelian “other” in this case? In a word, everybody the pair encounters on their journey. The sheer possibility that any individual encountered could be a cultist, opportunistic cannibal in search of a slave or a meal is enough to paint anybody the pair meets as a potential enemy. This terrifying reality is emphasized when the boy is grabbed by a “reptilian” knife-wielding cannibal who separated from his road-traveling cult to relieve himself in the woods, right where the man and boy were seeking cover from their encroaching convoy (McCarthy 75). In this event, McCarthy provides a concrete illustration of a human dialectic at work: a tense few moments of verbal exchange between thesis and antithesis, good and evil, human and monster; bloody synthesis ensues when the father shoots their assailant in the head, splattering his petrified son with gore.

Hegel theorizes that this process of overcoming ‘others’ (although not necessarily in such a brutal, physical manner), is a necessary step in attaining and affirming selfhood (*NATC* 542-43). The conflict between man and cannibal itself is indeed a very concrete demonstration of the “life-and-death struggle” Hegel cites as being necessary for the gaining of true self-consciousness (543). Both man and cannibal lay their lives on the line in a situation which can only end in the death of one and the affirmation of self-consciousness in the victor. After their run-in with the cannibal, the man becomes viscerally conscious of his selfhood as dictated by his role as father. As he washes the cannibal’s blood off his son, his internal monologue reflects this self-awareness: “This is my child...I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job” (74). In their encounter with the cannibal, the man and boy not only reinforce their sense of self as the good guys within the remnants of the human race, but the man also reinforces his secondary role within their combined role as good guys – namely his role as father, in being responsible for his son’s welfare.

Beyond this event’s Hegelian Marxist significance, it is highly significant in two other distinct ways: first, the pair are starving, yet refuse to turn to cannibalism for survival as the “bad guys” have done, hence emphasizing their agency as individuals capable of choosing not to subsist on human flesh, no matter how desperate they may be; second, because the father appears to be reminding himself that his son is indeed a part of his own “self,” as one of the good guys. The cannibals have resorted to eating their young, and even impregnating some of their female slaves for the implied purpose of eating the babies once they are born. While there is never any textual indication that the man would ever consider eating his son, it is of paramount importance that in their psychologically taxing lives the two at no point call into question what has become their earned self-consciousness as the “good guys,” or begin to question the moral guidelines to which they must adhere in order to remain as such.

Unfortunately, much as in modern, pre-apocalyptic life, existence can be especially challenging for those who might call themselves “good guys.” For one thing, providing for self and family can be more challenging for those who adhere to a strict code of morals and ethics. At the basis of the father’s and son’s ethical framework is, in turn, an essential promise to maintain all possible moral and ethical ties to the normative pre-apocalyptic world. The man, especially, seems to exhibit a marked anxiety over the widespread death of the hegemonic forces that once governed humankind and kept it from falling into its post-apocalyptic state of anarchy and depravity.

McCarthy writes: “He caught [a gray snowflake] in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom [*sic*]” (16). This reference to Christendom precedes the appearance of the recurring metaphor mutually understood and used between the man and boy of “carrying the fire;” which, based upon the context in which it is used, can be read to denote some form of divine protection, a belief ostensibly forfeited by the cannibals. The boy asks his father:

“And nothing bad is going to happen to us.”

“That’s right.”

“Because we’re carrying the fire.”

“Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire.”

In Christian belief, the Holy Spirit is often represented by a flame or fire, as is the heart of one who has been enlightened by the work of the Holy Spirit. Given McCarthy’s overt reference to Christendom, the reader can reasonably induce that McCarthy’s “good guys” are operating within a familiar, Christian code of ethics.

Worth mentioning here is that these hegemonic forces factor quite heavily into the “second nature” proposed earlier by Pepper. These forces are clearly evidenced by the man and boy’s behavior; that is, the manufactured and bilaterally consented-to code of conduct by which they both live is in fact an invention of pre-apocalyptic Western society, the implications of which fly in the face of a very basic instinctual will to survive by whatever means necessary. There is a notable regression on the part of the “others,” however, into what we as modern citizens of a Western civilization, founded upon Christian ideals, would consider to be a savage means of existence. The manufactured consent of even secular Western hegemonic structures can many times be traced back to some variant of a Judeo-Christian sensibility, but rarely to a sensibility which stands in opposition to Judeo-Christian doctrine. Indeed legislation, policy, and practices that appear to stray too far from these sensibilities are oft-times portrayed not only as religious taboo, but cultural taboo as well.

McCarthy’s cannibalistic cults have made the choice to adopt not only religiously and culturally taboo lifestyles, but have formed counter-humanistic hegemonic units wherein they agree to refrain from killing each other for food, but hunt the landscape for other individuals who do not belong to their particular cult. Small bands and even armies of these individuals roam the roads, all living according to their shared hegemonic ideal of cannibalism, but in competition with each other for both food and material resources. The man and boy, in contrast, do not overtly compete for resources until the resources they have already procured are unjustly stolen from them. Otherwise, the pair assumes the role of nomadic hunter-gatherers (with more emphasis, of course, on the gathering than the hunting), subsisting upon whatever canned goods or naturally occurring foods they find on their journey, and effectively living outside the hegemonic norms of the new, dominant cannibalistic society. They have learned how to carve out an existence, however limited and harsh, on what little food the Earth willingly provides for them, and with whatever protection they can provide for themselves.

This discussion of Hegelian selfhood and hegemony necessarily invites a deeper discussion of the more overtly Marxist qualities of McCarthian post-apocalyptic society as found in *The Road*. Marx and Engels, of course, were primarily concerned with the “material conditions of life,” which range from living conditions, to type and amount of food consumed, to technology and religious practice, and so forth (NATC 650). It is no coincidence that the minimalistic material conditions of the man and boy are a stark contrast to the material conditions of the cannibals, both in quality and in quantity. But McCarthy seems to make a very convincing case against the benefits of, or even the need for, expansive material conditions in a post-apocalyptic world, perhaps calling into question the need for expansive material conditions in our pre-apocalyptic world.

McCarthy implies that the roving bands of cannibals simply possess greater quantities of material goods than do the man and boy, and other “fire carriers” like them. The first band the pair encounters has a diesel-fueled truck with 165 gallons of diesel fuel in tow, an evident textual indication of trouble in itself, as though in the man’s eyes it would be impossible for people of their own moral stature to be in possession of such trappings. When the man awakes to the sound of the approaching vehicle, his terror is palpable: “God, he whispered [to the boy]...Quick. We have to run. Dont [*sic*] look back. Come on” (60-61). The man makes a safe assumption here; that the people who would be in possession of the most valuable resources in their resource-poor climate—vehicles and diesel fuel in this particular case—are likely willing to go to unthinkable lengths to procure and protect these resources. Indeed this post-apocalyptic bourgeoisie exists within a morally devoid social structure which allows them to maintain their dominant status by any means necessary, including the eating and/or enslaving of helpless passers-by (92).

While in light of the text's disorganized socio-political climate it is somewhat difficult to strictly qualify the cannibals as the post-apocalyptic bourgeoisie and the man and boy as being representative of the proletariat (as they do not perform waged labor for the cannibals), the possibility for this dynamic certainly exists, at least in theory. For example, during the standoff between the man and the cannibal, the man threatens to blow out very specific parts of the cannibal's brain. The cannibal attempts to reason with the man in eerily familiar capitalist terms, and tries to bait him by proposing: "Are you a doctor?... We got a man hurt. It'd be worth your while" (64). The man declines the invitation, of course, knowing full well that even if one of the cultists did require medical attention, to enter into any relationship with them would be an unretractable act and translate into either a necessary forsaking of self or of life—an act neither he nor the boy are willing to perpetrate.

The material conditions of the man and boy, and of the few other "good guys" they meet along the road are indeed close to what we might expect to see among the proletariat in any capitalist society: smaller in scale, sophistication, and quantity than those of the bourgeoisie. The man pushes their scant possessions before them in a shopping cart, rather than hauling them in a truck. Not having access to prolific amounts of diesel fuel, they rifle through a service station trash can to collect motor oil dregs from near-empty bottles, just so they can fuel their makeshift lamp. The cannibals wear gas masks and biohazard suits to protect themselves from the ash-laden air. The man and boy fashion masks from rags. The cannibals have rifles and plentiful ammunition. The man has a revolver with two precious rounds left in the cylinder—the only guarantee the two have against a slow and unthinkable death. The cannibals know how to kill, dress, and eat people. The young boy knows how to commit suicide.

In a similarly chilling run-in with the "other," the pair finds a band of cannibals in possession of an old plantation house, complete with a Master-locked cellar packed with wretched, naked "food," some of which has already been partially butchered while still alive. Meanwhile, the man and boy have no stockpiles beyond what their cart and their backs can carry. They have no promise of shelter beyond their ragged blue tarp and the occasional, serendipitous vacant house or stocked fallout shelter. But even when they happen upon these chance findings, they are never permanent in nature. They could never be permanent fixes, because as long as the man and boy maintain their selfhood and refuse to join the ranks of the multitudinous cannibals, they will effectively be Jamesonian "others;" beings who, by virtue of their "other-ness" are in this case marginalized to such an extent that they lose any remaining essence of their humanity and as a consequence become mere resources. But again, it is important to remember that the man and boy maintain their selfhood, and hence their otherness, by choice and not by necessity. They choose the path of most resistance and greatest danger in the hopes that they will find others like them. It is essential to acknowledge the pair's agency, because despite their unthinkable living conditions, the two do indeed have a choice in their means of survival and are at no point stripped of this agency or their ability to make this decision.

Questions of selfhood and agency aside, we need to ultimately consider the end game in mind on the part of both the "good guys" and the "bad guys" of McCarthy's story, if there is in fact any endgame at all. Although we might point to a simple will to survive as the driving force behind both good and bad, this would be a gross oversimplification, keeping in mind Pepper's concept of "second nature." In the case of the man and the boy, their goal is simple: to "carry the fire" south on the road in search of others "carrying the fire." This goal follows what Pepper points to as the "*natural* evolution of society," but so, in fact, does the goal of the cannibals. If we accept the definition of "society" as "[t]he state or condition of living in company with other people; the system of customs and organization adopted by a group of people for harmonious coexistence or mutual benefit," then we also need to accept that in McCarthy's narrative we see an example of two simultaneously evolving societies, for better or worse (*OED*).

What is truly fascinating about this point, from an eco-Marxist perspective, is the manner in which each opposing society appears to be evolving. Before the backdrop of an annihilated landscape devoid of any familiar natural resources, McCarthy presents to the reader a parallel evolution of semi-modern, semi-archaic societies, each of which has a choice in how to utilize whatever resources they might be able to procure for themselves, and neither of which is certain to be the dominant social structure in whatever future might be possible for the planet. Yes, the cannibals may have military strength in their numbers and in their access to technology (firearms and vehicles), but these strengths are also their greatest weaknesses. A tiny, serendipitous sack of filthy cornmeal means dinner and breakfast for two, but this meal would do little in feeding a large band of hungry cannibals. Similarly, the cannibals' masses of resources are both conspicuous and highly desirable for other cannibals.

Hence, when these large bands encounter “others” in possession of more resources, there will be little to no chance of avoiding conflict over gaining or retaining those resources. The boy and man, however, for the most part evade the “bad guys” and bloody conflict by being able to quickly conceal themselves and their meager possessions in the woods.

What really seems to be at issue here is a matter of societal scale and environmental carrying capacity. As a small “society,” the man and boy do not need much to survive, and in fact they are more conscious of their use of resources than the bands of cannibals appear to be. What is of life and death significance to the man and boy—their shopping cart, for example—is tossed aside as detritus by the cannibals. But when a wheel on their shopping cart breaks, the man is able to repair it within hours, whereas when the cannibals’ truck breaks down or runs out of fuel, repair or refueling could be a foreseeably cumbersome or even impossible affair, given the implied shortage of replacement parts and fuel. In this way, the cannibals’ reliance upon technology veritably enslaves them within an existence fraught with, from a survivalist standpoint, superfluity and an *increased* need for resources from an already depleted environment, rather than a diminished need for same. This self-propagating cycle of consumption, combined with their unsustainable population numbers, necessarily begets a social order counter-intuitively *based upon* consumption and exploitation, whereas the man and boy can get by on far less, with the added benefit of keeping their moral fibers intact.

While the technology at the cannibals’ disposal might still seem appealing to our modern sensibilities (and indeed to the man and boy who need to get by without it), this technology is in reality part and parcel of an oppressive system that relies upon, and exists as a result of, human atrocity and oppression. In this post-apocalyptic period there are practically no animals left. Therefore a firearm has but one remaining purpose: to kill people. As the entire world has been destroyed, the vehicle has but one remaining purpose: to aid in the finding, procurement, and transportation of enough resources to support the cannibals’ relatively large population numbers. In short, the only part of existence which remains to be annihilated by human rapaciousness is humanity itself; a task prejudicially embraced by the cannibals and judiciously resisted by those who “carry the fire.” It might be realistically expected that this unscrupulous consumptive nature implicit in the cannibals’ society will eventually be recognized as the toughest enemy the fire-carriers will need to fight. It would be difficult at this point not to draw some metaphorical connections between McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic vision of humanity and the current state of humanity as we know it. After all, most effective apocalyptic literature can trace the origins of its eschatological events to some source of truth or reality – otherwise it is mere fantasy writing. For example, some might not consider it much of a stretch to picture some contemporary, rapacious, political and/or corporate types in a life or death survival situation, willfully killing and eating pacifist, leftist tree huggers if it meant that they and their kind might live to see another day.

While this example might seem a bit extreme, so, too can the tendencies of ordinary people placed in extraordinary situations (consider the events that inspired the movie *Alive*, for example), let alone socioeconomically extra-ordinary people who might well have lost their moral scruples somewhere between Harvard Business School and managing their first hedge fund. This point is by no means meant to be read as a rash blanket classification of good and bad based upon socioeconomic standing, but those at the highest levels of the most rapacious and oppressive institutions in our world arguably live much to the same ethical beat as the cannibals in McCarthy’s vision. While there is no physical cannibalism that we know of taking place in the halls of Congress or in corporate boardrooms, there is certainly an undeniable and blatant disregard for the welfare of “others” in return for the blood cult’s lone survival into the next day.

From a purist ecocritical standpoint separate from socioeconomic considerations, McCarthy’s cannibals can be read as a representation of the most difficult foes environmentalists face in combating our planet’s diffuse environmental issues; namely, the diffuse self-perpetuating hegemonic systems that rely on the harvesting of limited natural resources for what is supposed to be ever-expanding profit, and are spearheaded by self-interested and rapacious individuals. In addition, there is the relentless tendency of multitudes of “others” outside the high-power, high-paying inner circles of these systems to believe that their only option for survival is complicity in these systems which oppress them in every facet of their daily lives, right down to the form and function of their very souls. But while this situation can seem hopeless at times, there is in fact a David for every rapacious Goliath. McCarthy’s nameless man has strong moral sensibilities, but his son’s are even stronger; he begs his father to adopt a young boy they pass on the road, even offering to sacrifice half of his own scarce food for the other boy’s sake, if they could only bring him along with them (86).

The man refuses, as he knows that their odds of survival are low enough for the two of them, let alone if they were to take on a third party. But McCarthy's message here points to a real hope that the "fire" does not have to wane with each subsequent generation, but can indeed grow stronger, as long as only a few individuals are willing to "carry the fire" and teach others to do the same. While McCarthy ends his novel on just such a hopeful note, this hope should be qualified by the realization of the overwhelming task which lies before both the boy and the other "fire-carriers" as well: the task of overcoming the brutality of widespread hegemonic systems that rely upon the exploitation of the environment, and more specifically, of other human beings. We should also remember that the O'Learyian apocalyptic "frame of acceptance" in *The Road* could potentially be read as being more tragic than comic. After all, the invention of nuclear weapons might have been a human error, but the decision to use them to such an extent as to cause a nuclear apocalypse responsible for the book's proceedings is an exercise in guilt. The true tragedy of this event is quite possibly not even the apocalypse itself, but what O'Leary would refer to as the "mechanism of redemption" which follows in its wake—the widespread killing and victimage at the hands of self-interested oppressors: a carnal display that the very worst tendencies of humanity, like the common cockroach, would be among the few things to survive Armageddon (Qtd. in Garrard 87).

While there is certainly the comedic sense of "recognition" of a transcendent human morality on the part of the man, the boy, and the other "fire carriers" who appear in the final pages, the reader is left to question whether the future of humanity will be a sustained tragedy wrought with sacrifice, or if it will bear witness to an unlikely resolution wherein the cannibalistic societies all recognize the error of their ways and become righteous, God-fearing citizens once again. Pipe dreams aside, worth considering is that O'Leary does appear to place much more emphasis on elements of "time, agency, authority, and crisis," and how these elements are dramatized within the text, than he places on where the narrative leaves the reader at the end of the story (Qtd. in Garrard 87). In this case, in light of the nomadic pair's tenacious agency alone, McCarthy's apocalypse is undoubtedly portrayed within a comedic frame of acceptance. While the man's time is limited, the righteous boy has a lifetime before him, and while there is no authority in their lawless world, the fire-carriers are governed by the laws of a higher power, as evidenced by the surrogates who take the boy in and talk to him about God. Since all who live in post-apocalyptic America, both good and bad, face the crisis of survival, the element of survival is arguably less pertinent than the aforementioned considerations of time, agency, and authority, and how the good and bad operate within these frames.

But while McCarthy's frame of apocalyptic acceptance might be comedic, this reader will not be holding his breath for a comedic resolution to this particular apocalypse. If history is any indication of what rises to the top of any socioeconomic or political system, far too often it is not the cream, but something far more offensive. The "others," those who exist outside the powerful inner circles of these systems, can do only what the fire carriers do in McCarthy's vision: carry the fire, but also help to spread it; to demonstrate to others that there is a realistic and even a better (albeit potentially more difficult) way to live. The fire carriers and cannibals will not resolve their differences, but will function as the "two great hostile camps" written about by Marx in his *Communist Manifesto* (NATC 658). But instead of control over mere resources, these camps will be vying for control over the collective soul of humanity: the prize on the line being a world governed either by a code of Golden-Ruled karma or a world governed by its antithesis of self-interest and lack of concern for fellow human being.

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