

Living in a Nightmarish world: ‘The Road’ by Cormac McCarthy

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Abstract:

Few would like to live in a world like Cormac McCarthy’s ‘The Road’! Never would anyone, perhaps, have dared to even imagine a post-apocalypse world until Cormac McCarthy holds it open before us through his creepy captivating novel, ‘The Road’. The present article is an attempt to explore how horrific is the journey down McCarthy’s ‘The Road’, and to trace what all he does to build such a monumentally mysterious world. This study deals with the atmosphere of horror as depicted by the author in his novel, and how he manages to keep readers on their toes with suspense concerning the fate of the two protagonists. I also want to question how existential issues heighten horror appeal in this bone-chilling narrative. It tries to trace the signs of the desperate longing to live down the road which is so dreadful and scary.

Keywords: Post-apocalypse world, creepy captivating novel, horrific journey, mysterious, bone-chilling, longing to live.

Introduction:

Horror is a genre of literature that is expected to scare, startle, shock and even repulse the readers. The oldest and strongest human emotion is fear. It is embedded in the psyche of people since time began. Mysterious phenomena ever haunt the world we live in. We try to explain it through fantasy or by attributing it to the handiwork of a high power.

The roots of horror genre run back to antiquity. The folklores focussing on death, the afterlife, evil, the demonic, the ghosts, witches, vampires, are the early examples of this genre. The ancient Indian scriptures are also found to be depicting horror with epic battles fought with demons. Grandmother telling bone-chilling tales of demons to her grand children is a grand example of early Indian tradition of horror stories. The germination of horror genre in Western literary world dates back to ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

Edgar Allan Poe, an exponent of Gothic novel tradition, is considered to have introduced this genre in the world of English literature. His works deal specifically with death. Occult ideas obsessed the authors like Mary Shelly's. Her ground-breaking work, 'Frankenstein' has proved to be a timeless work of this genre. Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' published in 1897, has also carved a niche in the English literary scenario as a typical horror fiction.

Horror is a varied genre that is very difficult to confine within a single defining word. It has a lot of categories and subgenres based on the theme it deals with. The label assigned to works evoking fear and apprehension are as quaint and awful as surreal horror, visceral horror, cosmic horror, apocalyptic horror, crime horror, erotic horror, occult horror and psychological horror.

Cormac McCarthy's novel, 'The Road' seems very illusive when we attempt to categorise this modern classic. It is made up of a strange mix of sci-fi, dystopian as well as apocalyptic sub-genres. We can better call it a rare crossover genre fiction exhibiting such confounding horrific pictures that a mind normally fails to fathom.

Review of Literature:

S. Dillon (2018): There is no doubt that 'The Road' is a horrific and horrifying novel in its affect, with its 'tableau of the slain and the devoured' and its 'blackened looters' tunnelling among the ruins of civilisation to retrieve precious tins of food, 'like shoppers in the commissaries of hell'

Jingjing Guo (2015): 'The Road' is set in a post-apocalyptic world some eight years after an enigmatic catastrophe set off a severely cold winter that has choked the land with a ubiquitous gray ash, killed the vegetation, and spared a few humans including nameless father and son. When one of the members of the cannibalistic blood cults holds the boy against his chest with the knife at his throat, the father does not hesitate to shoot him.

Joe Fassler (2013): The boy and his father have their most unnerving encounter with cannibals at an old house, just off the road. Hoping to find food and supplies, they approach the house. To their horror, they find a cellar full of naked and frightened people who are being held prisoner. One of them is missing limbs. How scariest the passage that narrates it, "Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched his throat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands": Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (77)

Journey down the Road:

Father and his son walk alone down the road lying through a burned America. Nothing seems to possess life in the devastated world save the ash on the wind. It is cold and dark, snow falls all around them while they head towards their destination-the far-away coast. They do not know what awaits them there. Still they brave against the bad weather and bands of cannibals stalking the road. They are left with nothing except a cart carrying their scavenged food, the clothes they were wearing, and a pistol to defend them. A side effect of the catastrophe is a permanently dirty air supply. The boy and his father constantly have their face covered to filter the ash, but the pollution takes its toll on the man. What does one do for a chronic lung ailment when there are no doctors and no medicine!

The road is an awfully boldest odyssey of father and son duo through dark and dread to a land of hope and light that they don't know if it exists or not.

Depiction of Horror:

It is a ghostly creepy era of post-catastrophe that the dark tale of 'The Road' recounts in a sadly serious tone. McCarthy tells 'nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before.' He declares bad times have arrived upon the world as a result of some enormous catastrophe. It could have been a nuclear war – reducing everything to ashes floating in the air. All most all animals are extinct, and a few humans are still living in a miserable way baser than beastly lives.

The tragic picture of Father and Son duo scavenging a little ray of hope under the deep layers of dust indeed horrifies the reader from the start to the finish. They take a road that runs through a dead land endlessly. Sometimes it appears that they are on the road not really to reach a destination, but just to keep in motion, one step ahead of death.

Against the backdrop of post-apocalyptic setting, McCarthy conjures up a world so bleak and appalling, and entirely his own. It is a land where even grasses and shrubs don't sprout because nothing can take root in the hard barren ash-capped soil. It is where the humankind struggle desperately to survive on what has been left behind. It is a terrain where humankind has turned on itself, and uses each other for food. The father and son outsmart and evade treacherous monsters such as marauding pack of murdering scavengers and monster-like cannibals. They face the calamities of nature, trees falling down on them, earthquakes erupting all on a sudden. It is unrelentingly dark, sickening a world full of horror and despair. There are moments in the novel which are genuinely ghoulish and terrifying. The most memorable and shocking of moments is when the man and the boy come across a seemingly empty house. Lured by the prospect of food, they enter its old, dilapidated basement which is full of chained humans, all naked, awaiting dismemberment by the cannibals. This scene makes the readers breathless with panic and shock. They find several mattresses and a pile of clothes within. There are a dozen starving naked men, women and children. And one man with a leg missing is lying there piteously. As the owners of the house arrive, the readers cannot help but connect the dots. The basement is a pantry, and these people are the livestock on which the homeowners are living on. McCarthy never points this out in detail deliberately. He leaves the image there to haunt the mind of the reader more terrifyingly forever.

Living in a Nightmarish World

Nobody would like to live in the nightmarish world that Cormac McCarthy conjures up in his 'The Road'. It is a haunting masterpiece that tests the depths of human resilience amidst an alarming world. The exploration of the ways of survival and concern of a father for his son without crossing over the confine of morality creates a lot of dramatic moments in the winding bodywork of 'The Road'. Throughout the novel, a struggle continues to uphold human decency and dignity. Relationship between the father and the son is constantly brought under trial, revealing a dichotomy that reflects the very essence of humanity in the face of death, destruction and despair.

Set against the backdrop of a post-apocalyptic world, "The Road" unties the reel of a grim picture such as a Doomsday. The landscape is sickening, the sky looks ghoulish, and signs of civilization lay scattered burnt and charred. The characters come across other people invariably inimical throughout the story. McCarthy makes this hideous world a stage to showcase the drama going on inside the deeper recess of the human psyche.

The lyrical appeal of the narrative lies in scenes where the father and son share intimate moments. The son questions his father about "carrying the fire," evoking a sense of hope and goodness amidst ugly uproar of brutality that deafens ears incessantly all along the narrative. It brings a sigh of relief to the reader who is put in suffocation starting from the first page.

The dichotomy that exists between the father and son is at the core of 'The Road'. The son is seen to have never loosed hope, nor does he ever lack the childlike curiosity about the world. His worries about ethics and morality serve as a polestar in their journey. He hauntingly asks his father whether he does right what he is doing. His quest for learning what is right and wrong amidst the shadow of death is astonishing.

On the contrary, the father, haunted down by the cruel realities of survival, finds hope as evasive. Father's obsession with a certain devastation of the world is reflected in his actions, while the son is ever taking it on his own to refrain his father from becoming a bad guy. The struggle of father and son against backdrop of the ritual aspects of dominance and death depicted in the novel also suggests the plight of man to reconcile between hope and despair.

"The Road" embodies celebration of hope is still visibly present amidst ruins. McCarthy well proves that the mini marathon of father and son duo is nothing but a great journey of humanity. In a message to mankind, it also echoes the message of predecessor novelist Earnest Hemingway's *The Oldman and the Sea* wherein the former has said man may be destroyed but cannot be defeated. The son stands for regeneration and renewal, a sweet expectation for a better future. Just the same, the father is desperately concerned with the realities of survival in a world where certainty is illusive for all in the face of the inevitability of horrific death. At last the father dies after ensuring that his son will survive when he becomes sure that is adopted by a new family.

Conclusion

McCarthy's 'The Road' not only delineates in minute details the post-apocalyptic nightmare but also exposes generational tension and delicate father-son relationship that has earned title of modern classic for this off-bit work of art. Indeed, this masterpiece of McCarthy exposes the fragile aspects of humanity while celebrating the enduring hope that all is not lost from the world.

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