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Homelessness in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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## Contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction.....	3
2. Meaning of Home.....	9
3. Homeless future. Dystopian societies.....	13
3.1. Homelessness as a result of Capitalism.....	16
3.2. Migration, Displacement and Exile.....	19
4. Homelessness in McCarthy's the road.....	21
5. Conclusions.....	32
Bibliography:.....	34

## Abstract

Dystopian narratives have been on the rise lately. Novels, TV shows or movies are becoming more prevalent nowadays. In this master thesis, I will analyze one of the most popular dystopian novels of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This post-apocalyptic novel portrays a father and son journey through a devastated USA. This master thesis focuses on analyzing the motif of homelessness throughout Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the depiction of homelessness in literature as well as going over other scholar's analysis of motifs such as place, placelessness, migration, displacement and capitalism.

Keywords: Analysis, Post-apocalyptic novel, Cormac McCarthy, Homelessness, *The Road*, Place, Placelessness, Capitalism, Migration, Displacement.

Las novelas distópicas son cada vez más populares últimamente. Hoy en día, novelas, series, o películas sobre este tema son cada vez más habituales. En esta tesis, analizaré una de las novelas distópicas más populares del siglo 21, *The Road* de Cormac McCarthy. Esta obra post apocalíptica sigue el viaje de un padre y su hijo a través de unos Estados Unidos devastados. Esta tesis busca analizar el tema de la indigencia en la novela de Cormac McCarthy, la visión que se da de este tema en la literatura y al mismo tiempo analizar la visión que otros autores dan de temas como el lugar, el no lugar, el capitalismo, la migración o el desplazamiento.

Palabras clave: Análisis, Novela post apocalíptica, Cormac McCarthy, Indigencia, *The Road*, Lugar, No lugar, Capitalismo, Migración, Desplazamiento.

## 1. Introduction.

Bleak, dark, and piercing cold, it was a night for the well-housed and fed to draw round the bright fire, and thank God they were at home; and for the homeless starving wretch to lay him down and die. Many hunger-worn outcasts close their eyes in our bare streets at such times, who, let their crimes have been what they may, can hardly open them in a more bitter world.

Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist

Homelessness in literature has been a surprisingly unexplored topic throughout history. On the one hand, one can find a romanticized side of life on the road looking for adventure and freedom which has been explored in various works throughout literary history. On the other hand, in a naturalist way, homelessness has been introduced and explained as a result of human societies that have drowned in failures both in terms of economy as well as social affairs. More often than not, this second depiction is aimed towards a study and understanding of people who live on the street. Therefore, if we analyze the depiction on homelessness in literature, it has been broadly romanticized. Nonetheless, American history cannot be understood without homelessness, in the ear of the great depression when many people lost everything and found themselves suddenly living on the streets. This event was the one that put American society in touch with said topic. As a matter of fact, this is shown in John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* (1945), a story in which a group of homeless people stand as the main characters. They live in an abandoned warehouse, which they call the Palace, which is highly paradoxical for a homeless narrative. Probably one of the best depictions of homelessness was done by the British writer Arthur Blaire, best known as George Orwell. He was one of the first writers to dig into the homeless motif in his work *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Leaving behind the romanticized side

of homelessness, he adopts a more naturalist and objective focus by narrating his own experiences when living as a homeless. Orwell steps away from the more traditional approach of homelessness in literature and shifts his focus towards the prejudices shed upon this group, showing their humanity. Despite the fact that readers might have a hard time relating to it, Orwell tries to remove the stigma by comparing begging to a normal job. He condemns the laws introduced to fight homelessness as it is society's scourge; hence governments should try to eradicate this sickness of society in order to avoid its spreading and corrupting the rest. Therefore, as mentioned before, despite the fact that homelessness is not exclusive to American narratives, there is probably a greater understanding and connection between homelessness and America than any other country in the world and one could probably not understand American literature without homelessness or vice versa. Homelessness in the US is a current problem being talked about. *Jacobin* mag's reporter Brian Hennigan stated that in recent years, the criminalization of homeless people has skyrocketed in America providing the following data:

Being anywhere with a makeshift bed or shelter — have increased by 69 percent; the criminalization of sleeping in public by 31 percent; of sitting or lying down on a sidewalk, 52 percent; of panhandling, 43 percent; and finally against loafing or loitering, 88 percent. (Hennigan 2019)

Why are we concerned about homelessness? We might assume that it only affects marginal groups which, in most cases, is totally left aside from society. Therefore, why do people care about it? We might reasonably be drawn to it because of its morbidity. In a lifetime, most of the people do not see themselves in a state of complete poverty, nevertheless it is something that we are close to even without realizing so. The fear of losing the place we live in as well as the compassion that we have towards others in that situation is separated by a very thin line. Therefore, reading about it might be a way of

diving into a close but still unknown world that we want to know more about. Homeless people are compelling as they have been seen throughout history as dehumanized or not worthy enough to live in society. In the US, the homeless motif has carved the way we understand American identity.

This study covers the idea of homelessness in American literature, exploring some of its central motifs, to finally more specifically on McCarthy's work, *The Road* (2006). Besides the concept and representation of homelessness, the thesis also analyzes the literary representation of dystopian societies going over motifs like placelessness, capitalism, migration and exile which are then projected onto the analysis of McCarthy's novel.

McCarthy's *The Road* follows the journey of a caring father and his son as they try to survive through a post-apocalyptic United States of America which is now a wasteland filled with danger and death. They continue their journey trying to go south hoping to find warmer weather, as the cold they experience throughout their journey becomes something almost unbearable and would be their demise. Moreover, we come to know that the father has a terminal breathing disease while his son goes through some moral dichotomies as he struggles to find what is right and what is wrong, living in a constant struggle to find his place in this world, where survivors are embodied by savage ravager gangs, men with no principles that will stop at nothing in order to ensure their survival, or people that suffer at the hands of the latter. They wear raggedy clothes and push a shopping cart where they have their canned food and water they find along the way; these motifs will be later analyzed as they form the exterior appearance of a homeless person which is different to the rest of society (they have principles and do not share the Machiavellian view of doing anything in order to survive).

As mentioned before, the narrative follows a travelling structure where the depiction of events happens entirely on the road. Among America's most beloved topics, the road, and the idealized life on the road of adventure, discovery and enlightenment stand out. The characters presented are on the search for happiness while living with just the basic and discovering the small things in life leading to the ultimate appreciation of life itself as a way of witnessing the Nirvana. There was an entire movement dedicated to the depiction of this motif. It occupies center stage in Kerouak's *On the Road* (1957), flagship of the Beat generation together with Burrows or Ginsberg. Despite the popularity of the works previously mentioned, McCarthy's novel takes a totally different approach to what was previously seen in American literature, a much darker one. He introduces a road with more negative connotations and less happiness, in a much more naturalist way as Orwell did, describing the hardships of life on the road. Moreover, Kerouak's depiction of the homeless character is much more romanticized as well as aimed towards symbolizing a dissatisfaction with the American society of the time. Furthermore, critics have found the recurrent motif of the road on the Beat generation to be flavored with a sense of adventure and personal freedom, like a spiritual journey towards the discovery of happiness, away from the chains of stale permanence in one place where one settles down forever. This forever carries connotations of stability but in a monotone way, boring, doomed to be living in the same place for the rest of your days as a modern day Sisyphus.

Cormac McCarthy's work strives to be more than just a pleasing read. It appears as if he is seeking the questioning of his audience regarding all the current social conventions as well as the things that people take for granted. In a way, he looks as if he is digging deep into people's own sense of morality, what is good and what is bad. He achieves this by taking his characters to very dark places. He does so placing them in a

setting where chaos becomes a total reality rending the social conventions that we hold on completely useless. We see how Mother Nature rises, wounded as if prepared to smite, vengeful for what humanity had done to it leaving the world in complete ruins. This becomes the setting, again very far from what had been seen in road narratives in American literature, where the author is looking to dive into the ethics and morality not only of the story's character but the readers as well.

McCarthy introduces a wide variety of motifs within the narrative. The main one which this study explores is homelessness. One cannot help but wonder why it is that the author has put so much emphasis in said motif which becomes central in the narrative. This curiosity was probably what triggered the present thesis.

Nowadays, the traditional idea of home is fading away. Home has always been a place where one goes after work to relax as well as to enjoy time with family. This is becoming less frequent as the concept of family is far from what it used to and so is the idea of home. Moreover, we have given away our privacy; we no longer get to choose what we want to give away to others as we are being constantly monitored and targeted by capitalism through a whole array of mechanisms. The inherent idea that home is private, our intimate space where we feel safe, and we can be who we really want to be is gone. Even what we do at home is being devised by somebody else; we watch the same tv shows or movies, we read the same books, we work out the way we are told to, we follow a diet that has been suggested to us. We are vulnerable, living in an Orwellian *1984* world where we are being constantly monitored and controlled. Works such as this one have been more relevant lately. Nowadays our dystopian future is something we are concerned about and therefore we want to think about it, read about it. Consequently, zombie shows, movies and novels are becoming incredibly popular, from AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010), Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) —which was then turned into



a movie in 2013 to McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), all this contributes to the sudden rise of dystopian narratives at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Scholars such as Reimer, (2013) have explored the influence of homeless Canadian narratives and its growing popularity, as well as its morality testing effects on readers dealing with social issues. In the same way, this work also strives to find some kind of traces in McCarthy's work leading to social awareness on current affairs such as homelessness, global warming or capitalism.

## 2. Meaning of Home.

As mentioned before, the idea of home is in jeopardy, it has been fading lately. We might be witnessing the last years of the long-idea of home as we knew it. Relationships in families are getting more distant. There is no longer a common area in the house where one can share their free time with their loved ones. Everyone is in their own room isolated from the rest of the family, from the house itself. We are less present in our own homes. We carry out the same type of activities at home as we could at a local Starbucks, we just need our laptop and a Wi-Fi connection to simulate our own bedroom. Therefore, the idea of home is overlapping and losing its essence, it is becoming less of a special and sort of sacred place making way to a space that might give you the same things a coffee shop would. This might sound a little bit as an exaggeration but it is definitely something to look out for as the homeless dystopian societies which have been depicted as of late might be less dystopian and more real than we might think. The idea of home is something different if we asked our parents 60 years ago, in this world in constant change where said changes occur at an exhilarating pace, concepts might disappear or undergo drastic changes without us even realizing that we have left behind societies where values such as family and home were cornerstones.

The human being first started to organize in small groups of hunters-gatherers. These small groups of individuals were not used to settling down and were always on the move, foraging, that is to say, looking for preys to hunt or food to be gathered. With

the increase of these groups resulting in resources not being enough for everybody which caused disputes between groups. In order to avoid this, these associations developed with the invention of agriculture into farmers who had to settle down. Through time, most hunter-gatherer groups who did not change their lifestyle were conquered or assimilated by farming societies. From that point on, individuals have developed an idea of belonging, of home as they spent most of their lifetime in the same place.

The idea of home carries great significance in McCarthy's work. In order to illustrate the analysis of the idea of home in this novel, one must refer first to the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard. In his *Poetics of Space* (1969), he analyzed the long-lasting idea of home in an attempt to explain human's need for a place to stay and how it is something inherent to human beings regardless of their social status as seen below:

For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty. Authors of books on "the humble home" often mention this feature of the poetics of space. But this mention is much too succinct. Finding little to describe in the humble home, they spend little time there; so they describe it as it actually is, without really experiencing its primitiveness, a primitiveness which belongs to all, rich and poor alike, if they are willing to dream ( Bachelard, 4)

"Even the humblest dwelling has beauty" sums it up perfectly. This inherent need of home and belonging does not differ when it comes to a different social class, "a primitiveness which belongs to all, rich and poor alike".

The notion of home is inherent to the human being. It is true that we need to have shelter, a place to find refuge, but more importantly, human beings need a place of belonging, to feel part of a greater thing than ourselves. In McCarthy's work, the main two characters are always on the move, and in most cases they do not have a place to

sleep, a shelter, nevertheless, they seem like they are always content to be around as they have each other. That feeling of belonging lies within them so the only thing that matters to them is sticking together and surviving, therefore there are some parts of Bachelard's notion of home that are somewhat different as what it is portrayed in *the Road*.

Bachelard goes over the idea of ditching away that physical notion of home and takes it one step further: "All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard, 5). There is no need of inhabiting a physical structure in order to feel at home or to recognize that place as such. Therefore, he thinks of the idea of home as a universe.

Expanding on what was previously mentioned, there is no feeling of belonging to a physical place in McCarthy's story. Every time the two main characters get to a place which seems safe, where they feel comfortable, something that resembles a home. They end up leaving for security reasons in a short time, the world is not safe anymore, and therefore the feeling of safeness that is inherent of a home is not there, not the cozy and comfortable feeling which cradles us when we get home from a hard day.

There is another element that must be highlighted. It is the direct relationship between memories and home as seen in the following quote by Bachelard:

"And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of motionless childhood" (Bachelard, 5).

As explained before, Bachelard's analysis on the importance of the house, as a vessel of memories, and how the house and its different rooms hold memories that will be forever cherished, this carries deep meaning in the novel we are analyzing as we will

see later on, as McCarthy uses this connection introduced by Bachelard to connect present and past through the father's old house.

Another concept which is found in the novel is the idea of place and placelessness. This idea becomes crucial to our understanding of the father and son's journey. The concept of place that one can see in McCarthy's novel is fairly as the one introduced by Edward Relph in the analysis he carries out in his work, *Place and Placelessness* (1976). Relph contends that the place in human experiences has a deep meaning as people have been protecting what they held important, their places and homes against external threats. He goes over the idea of nostalgia and homesickness and how we human beings experience these kinds of feelings and how they have become something natural to us and therefore we treat them as something we might even need or that we take for granted. He defends that a characteristic of being human is to live in a world full of places which have been, are of will become significant to us, as we humans need to have a place to belong to (Relph, 1976, 1). This idea contrasts with what one finds in the novel, where the main two characters seem to have lost their feeling of belonging in the world; they just roam around trying to survive and hopefully make it to the coast where they might find some kind of safety which is never really shown. This might be due to the fact that in order to fully develop a dystopian narrative, most of the current values must be broken or left apart. Consequently, the idea of place constitutes something totally worthless. Later on we will cover the fact that the idea of place is something totally meaningless for the son while it still holds a lot of meaning for the father, showcasing the difference between the pre-apocalyptic view and the post-apocalyptic one of the idea of place.

### 3. Homeless future. Dystopian societies.

Homelessness in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) can be interpreted as a warning of how societies might be evolving into losing the sense of home, portraying a homeless future in a dystopian society. The one thing that sets this work apart from other dystopian writings is the fact that the causes of the apocalypse are not explained as mentioned before. One can only assume what happened which resulted in the world depicted by the native of Providence, Rhode Island. By doing so, McCarthy shifts the focus to the society itself rather than what caused it. As opposed to pure dystopian novels such as Orwell's *1984* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945), or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) where the focus is placed on the political system gone totally out of control.

According to Merriam Webster dictionary the word "utopia" is defined as a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions ("Utopia," def.). On the other hand, a dystopia is defined as an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives. ("Dystopia", def.).

The political progression of humanity has always strived to find a better political model in order to advance closer to the utopian system. This utopian world is conceived as a political system which as o provide abundance for everybody. Nonetheless, the resources needed to achieve this might come from somewhere. The planet has finite resources and once everything runs out, the world becomes a barren land, a wasteland

where there is no longer access to the necessary resources needed to live. This constitutes a dystopian world where we witness history's death.



*The barren land. The Road (2009) Image 1.*

The novel goes even further as in order to survive, once no resources are available, one has to turn to whatever is left, cannibalism. The other option is starving to death. McCarthy introduces a dystopian man who has become its own predator.

Coming back he found the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts. He pushed at the bones with the toe of his shoe. They looked to have been boiled. No pieces of clothing. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 73).

In this dystopian society, the human being resembles an animal, the only thing separating both is that one cooks its food. In *Hunger and The Apocalypse Of Modernity in Cormac Mccarthy's The Road* (2011), Matthew Mullins covered the idea of hunger in McCarthy's *The Road* His analysis of hunger is a great take on one of the novel's primary topics. Nonetheless, Mullin's analysis significantly disconnected from the idea

homelessness in dystopian future. To start with, homeless individuals struggle mainly with two things, cold and hunger. Cold in *The Road* will be analyzed later on, while hunger, an element which is closely related to homelessness, becomes a motor in itself.

Every character in the novel is hungry, despite the fact that we mainly follow the father and his son. Everybody living in this post-apocalyptic world is pushed by their hunger to do whatever necessary in order to survive. Moreover, this leaves the two main characters with some moral decisions they have to live with. Consequently, hunger does not only become the engine that keeps them moving, but also leaving them with moral dichotomies such as the one portrayed in the following conversation:

We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we? [the boy asks]

No, Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now.

You said we werent.

I said we werent dying. I didnt say we werent starving.

But we wouldnt.

No. We wouldnt.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 128)

The amount of dystopian narratives has skyrocketed in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. There is something common in all of them, which is the lack of hope, the lack of a future. A world one cannot live in is a homeless future where we cannot find a place to live, to settle, to call a home, where one can feel safe. There



is a clear distinction between the utopian dream symbolized for the American way of life, the American dream, which is somewhat paradoxical as it might have been that same dream following the capitalist system, which might have ended up exploiting the world into the barren land depicted in the novel. It is quite shocking the way the pursuit of a utopia can end up in totally the opposite. Nonetheless, this will be analyzed more thoroughly in the section dealing with homelessness as a result of capitalism in McCarthy's novel.

### 3.1. Homelessness as a result of Capitalism.

The problem of poverty in general and homelessness in particular, has haunted mankind ever since the evolution of human beings from hunter-gatherers into farmers, changing a nomadic way of living into a sedentary one. Whether we like it or not, resources are finite and throughout history societies have been struggling and fighting in order to get control over these resources through violent means. Nowadays, the struggle and the fighting for resources is still there but not in the form of threatening warlords or chiefs.

Throughout McCarthy's novel, we can see instances of regression to hunter-gatherer societies that lack a home or a stable place to live in. As explained later on, McCarthy's work can be read as a dystopian novel set in a post-apocalyptic world which could have been caused by Capitalism's harmful effects on the world that we live in, resulting in devastating consequences for both the planet, and the people living in it.

Scholars such as Žižek, have already claimed, in his *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (2014) that late capitalism is deeply

connected with the individual's lack of a concrete position. In the work what Badiou introduced as the term "worldlessness". (Žižek, 2014) As Žižek summarizes it,

Alain Badiou has argued that we live in a social space which is increasingly experiences as 'worldless': in such a space, the only form protest can take is meaningless violence. Perhaps this is one of the main dangers of capitalism: although by virtue of being global it encompasses the whole world, it sustains a 'worldless' ideological constellation in which people are deprived of their ways of locating meaning. (*London Review of Books* 2011)

Žižek's analysis of Badiou's concept of "worldlessness", significantly akin to Jameson's well-known notion of the disorientation of man under conditions of late capitalism (Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) is found in McCarthy's depiction of the world is showing two sides which are closely linked. On the one hand we have a post-apocalyptic world while on the other we see a post capitalist world. The novel is conceiving an end to capitalism which would consequently result in the end of the world as we know it, as a result of the reckless management of the capitalist system and consumerism.

Perhaps the ultimate illustration of the ruins of capitalism is represented in the novel through the heavily stylized and ritualistic image of the son drinking a can of the world famous brand Coca-Cola that his father found in the ruins of an old supermarket shown below.

What is it, Papa? It's a treat. For you. ... The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said. Go ahead. He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said. Yes. It is. You have some, Papa. I want you to drink it. You have some. He took the can and

sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here. It's because I won't ever get to drink another one, isn't it? Ever's a long time. Okay, the boy said. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 22)

The reader has only the perception that that same coke can is the kid's first but might as well be his last. First of all, throughout the novel there are not a lot of names and it looks like everything has lost its identity or maybe it is just unimportant in a world where the only thing that matters is staying alive. Therefore, the mere fact that the name of the brand is mentioned makes it hold a great deal of significance and importance. In a way, the mention of coke sets up the reader on the right track in order to try and guess the novel's setting, so one can know that the father and son are living in a post capitalism era though the son does not know what that item is, therefore the reader can set the story somewhat inside that small window. The sheer image of the coke covered in ashes holds a really strong meaning. If one thinks of an item that could represent capitalism a can of coke would definitely be a good way to go. Nevertheless, as stated before, McCarthy's approach towards current affairs is quite critical. Therefore, this may as well be an open critique to globally mass manufactured products and its consequences, which in the novel's case is an apocalypse filled with misery, hunger and violence.

Slavoj Žižek seems overly concerned with this as shown in a slogan from his documentary film called *The Perverts Guide to Ideology* (2013) where he states the following:

Think about the strangeness of today's situation: Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating,

because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism. (*The Perverts Guide to Ideology* 2013)

This statement illustrates the analysis of environmentalism as well as the effect that global capitalism can have in the world. Despite the fact that one cannot overtly claim that the novel's intention was to influence global awareness on consumerism as well as environmentalism, the reasons previously given hint that it might have.

### 3.2. Migration, Displacement and Exile.

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, McCarthy's usage of the "road" motif differs from classic American literature. The road that we see in Fonda's *Easy Rider* (1969) is very different from what is depicted in McCarthy's *The Road* which showcases a more naturalistic approach to the American motif, losing all traces of leisure, personal freedom, adventure and discovery, and turning its focus on basic survival and hardship. McCarthy is known for incorporating movement into his narratives; the journey becomes the cornerstone of his writing, as for instance instance, in his Border Trilogy, constituted by *All the Pretty Horses* (1993), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). McCarthy's resourceful use of geography becomes crucial to the narratives, well while the border, used allegorically, occupies center stage in his novels. This translates into his 2006 work where, though the use of the border might not be as common or apparent than in previous works, the use of a dislocated ruinous geography continues to be paramount.

Throughout the McCarthy's *The Road*, the journey of both main characters, father and son respectively, follows a similar route if compared to nowadays' migration and exile trips that are recurrently present in news programs. For instance, the European migrant crisis. Starting in 2005, this crisis becomes crucial to the analysis of migration and displacement in McCarthy's novel as it was published in 2006, just one year later to the crisis' beginning. The migrant crisis consisted in a steady flux of numerous people entering the European Union. Their main access point to get into Europe was through the Mediterranean Sea. Their place of origin was from poorer countries in its vast majority, mainly from poverty and war-torn African countries. Though not addressing the migrant crisis directly, or referencing it at any point in the narrative. McCarthy's depiction of a post-apocalyptic world shockingly resembles the recent migratory crisis found in the Middle Eastern countries and the northern part of Africa.

The main characters are moving from an unsafe place, from poverty and hunger, with the hope of finding a safer place embodied by the coast. Again, one cannot openly portray McCarthy's intention but merely point out that the novel can be read this way.

## 4. Homelessness in McCarthy's the road.

In this section, I will make an analysis of homelessness in McCarthy's novel as well as other motifs that are closely related to its development. As mentioned before, the novel submerges the reader into a homeless world, not only metaphorically speaking, but also literally. As described by the American writer, the characters are depicted as everyday hoboes that people might gaze upon with disgust on the street. They wear raggedy clothes, eat garbage they found on the street, go around with a grocery cart full of junk. In the following passage, McCarthy gives us a hint so our imagination can fly and imagine how people in his post-apocalyptic novel would look like

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 18)



*Father and son. The Road (2009) Image 2.*

Throughout the novel, we find two main recurrent elements surrounding the man and his son which are deeply tied to homelessness. On the one hand we have the freezing cold that they experience throughout their journey. McCarthy might have introduced this idea of cold as it is one of the most common problems that homeless people have to face in their everyday life. It could also be as a way of criticizing the mismanagement that capitalism makes of the world leading to global warming and climate change, resulting in extreme temperatures which fits perfectly well with the post-apocalyptic world of the novel. As mentioned before, McCarthy's work has been closely connected to current affairs and problems, therefore, despite the lack of details and information regarding the causes of the world's apocalypse depicted in the novel, it would be foolish not to take into account the importance that the theme of cold is given, as whatever destroyed the world has had the effect of an everlasting winter. We have all

heard at least at one point in our lives the amount of homeless people that die during wintertime due to the extremely low temperatures. Life on the street becomes even harder.

They were days fording that cauterized terrain. The boy had found some crayons and painted his facemask with fangs and he trudged on uncomplaining. One of the front wheels of the cart had gone wonky. What to do about it? Nothing. Where all was burnt to ash before them no fires were to be had and the nights were long and dark and cold beyond anything they'd yet encountered. Cold to crack the stones. To take your life. He held the boy shivering against him and counted each frail breath in the blackness. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 10)

The one element that stands out from the freezing cold is the fire. McCarthy uses the fire element both ways; there are instances where fire represents coziness and safety. The dad and his son are enjoying being warm for a change.

They camped against a boulder and he made a shelter of poles with the tarp. He got a fire going and they set about dragging up a great brushpile of wood to see them through the night. They'd piled a mat of dead hemlock boughs over the snow and they sat wrapped in their blankets watching the fire and drinking the last of the cocoa scavenged weeks before. It was snowing again, soft flakes drifting down out of the blackness. He dozed in the wonderful warmth. The boy's shadow crossed over him. Carrying an armload of wood. He watched him stoke the flames. God's own fire-drake. The sparks rushed upward and died in the starless dark. Not all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground. He woke toward the morning with the fire down to coals and walked out to the road. Everything was alight. As if the lost sun were returning at last. The snow orange and quivering. A forest fire was making its way along the tinder-box ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like the northern lights. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 22)

The fire not only becomes a recurrent motif full of positive connotations. See the world represented in the narrative also abounds in scorched fields, blackened cities and landscapes coated in ashes. This gives an impression of total desolation and demise. We stand hopeless watching what once was a prosperous place full of nature and life now



being consumed by fire, ash and ravagers. It gives us the idea that the world is dying, if nature, life the origin of our planet is gone, so is all hope of going back to what once was: happiness, peace and freedom.

The fire motif plays a key part in keeping up with the topic we have been analyzing. It is the element that ties the homeless community together. In this case it yields the double sense, one of destruction and apocalypse, and the other of warmth, hope, bonding. Every time the two main characters light a fire, they forget about the cold at least for a moment. Nonetheless, lighting a fire is not something they do often as it poses a big risk for them as they do not want to be spotted. If they were to light a fire they would be seen from miles away, therefore it becomes a luxury that they can only enjoy in rare occasions. Every time they stand next to a fire it portrays the image of homeless people gathering around a burning gas tank trying to get warm or maybe cooking some canned beans they found in a garbage can.

Throughout the novel, the man and his son struggle to find supplies to survive, but sometimes the reader feels more for them due to the fact that they are almost freezing to death. The fire gives the reader a feeling of comfort and coziness. They feel like home when they are sitting around a campfire and they can forget, even for a moment, the harsh reality they are living in. Hunter-gatherer societies were known to travel with fire ever since its discovery around 1 million years ago. A vital importance was placed upon maintaining the fire burning as their survival depended on it. Throughout the novel, this is highlighted by the man as a way to calm his son down.

He woke in the night and lay listening. He couldn't remember where he was. The thought made him smile. Where are we? He said.

What is it, Papa?

Nothing. We're okay. Go to sleep.

We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?

Yes. We are.

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. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 52)

Nonetheless, it is referring to the fire metaphorically, which would, in this case, refer to the fact that they are the ones still carrying that "humanity" in them, as they could consider themselves to be the "good guys", the ones that still have some sort of moral code to live by as will be seen below when we cover the idea of cannibalism.

The homeless motif becomes most present in an instance which becomes crucial to reading McCarthy's novel. The father and his son stumble upon a key place as seen below:

The day following some few miles south of the city at a bend in the road and half lost in the dead brambles they came upon an old frame house with chimneys and gables and a stone wall. The man stopped. Then he pushed the cart up the drive.

What is this place, Papa?

It's the house where I grew up.

The boy stood looking at it. The peeling wooden clapboards were largely gone from the lower walls for firewood leaving the studs and the insulation exposed. The rotted screening from the back porch lay on the concrete terrace. They found a place which I is in total decay and rot, what once was a place of refuge and happiness is now a helpless place, in the following passage we can see the clear difference of the idea of home that the kid and his father have:

Are we going in?

Why not?

I'm scared.

Dont you want to see where I used to live?

No.

It'll be okay.

There could be somebody here.

I dont think so.

But suppose there is?

He stood looking up at the gable to his old room. He looked at the boy. Do you want to wait here?

No. You always say that.

I'm sorry.

I know. But you do. . (McCarthy, *The Road*, p 17)

As we mentioned before, Relph's analysis of place (1979) shows that this is something which can vary depending on the people. In the novel, we will be seeing the different kinds of identities that different places have depending on the different characters based on their own experience, as for example as we have seen before, the consciousness and perspective of the father towards his old home is totally different to the one of his son. The importance of a place varies drastically depending on the people you ask. Therefore, despite the fact that Relph's introduction to the concept of place varies completely from the, one could say, post-apocalyptic view of the concept of place, the novel just portrays the complexity of said concept taking it to the extreme.

On the one hand, we have the figure of the father; he has witnessed the world before and after the apocalypse, he is the one recognizing the house and therefore the past that comes with it. Furthermore, while the son does not want to get in because he is scared, the father is calming him saying that it is okay as he knows this place and still

gives him a feeling of safety. Throughout the novel, every time the two main characters go through a town they want to avoid being spotted or having any type of confrontation with others. That is why they try to avoid getting inside houses. Nonetheless, whenever they want to set foot in a house, they are very cautious before doing so. In this instance this is not seen, they are not wary of whichever danger might be inside.

We see the difference between the idea of the home for the father and the kid in the sense that the son has never experienced it, he has never been living in a house, he has never experienced the warmth and security; everything he has experienced is living in a homeless world where he has to be always on the move and it looks as there it is no rest. On the other hand, the father's old house is what links him to the past, to happier days. He decides to abandon their usual carefulness just to experience that feeling, one more time, just one. The father tries to show his son where he used to live, where he grew up. One can admire the great deal of significance that the father gives to his old house while to the kid this is just one more building in ruins with no feelings attached to it. McCarthy wants to show us both realities. This might even be taken as a depiction of a real life equivalent with the wars on the middle east and all the people that have had to migrate leaving their homes behind as there might be some children among these people that the only reality that they have experienced is being homeless moving away from their country and their families.

In the previous passage, the father and his son come around the man's old house, where he grew up. Despite the fact that they avoided going inside houses as there might be someone inside, which could result in violent confrontation, they do so anyways. And when it is time to leave, the father agrees that they should do so, but he finally does not. Notice the importance that McCarthy places on a seemingly worthless place, which

is an abandoned house, the main characters from the story must have come across many houses before that one, always evading them. The fact that this one holds a special place in the man's heart changes everything. He does not belong anywhere in this dystopian world, nonetheless, there is an unknown force that drags him towards his past, his memories. A part of him wants to go back to his childhood, far away from the harsh reality they live in. The detailed description of the house and its different rooms. How everything is carefully detailed, as if the memories were fresh as yesterday. McCarthy chooses carefully to stop and describe this place as no other giving it the emotional importance it has for the main character:

They slipped out of their backpacks and left them on the terrace and kicked their way through the trash on the porch and pushed into the kitchen. The boy held on to his hand. All much as he'd remembered it. The rooms empty. In the small room off the diningroom there was a bare iron cot, a metal foldingtable. The same castiron coalgrate in the small fireplace. The pine paneling was gone from the walls leaving just the furring strips. He stood there. He felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy. He turned and looked out at the waste of the yard. A tangle of dead lilac. The shape of a hedge. On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didn't. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 18)

Relph's introduction of the idea of place and placelessness (1979) sheds some light on McCarthy's approach on being insensitive to a place's significance in a post-apocalyptic reality, albeit everything depending on the individual. As illustrated below, places which before held a great deal of importance, are now rendered useless and it is quite interesting how these places become just part of the landscape, just like everything that dies merges with the earth. Therefore, the idea of place to its broader extent, becomes meaningless. This completely clashes with Relph's idea of place (1979), McCarthy breaks completely with a previous way of conceiving place which totally makes the

reader get immersed into the story as one could feel the placelessness, feeling almost lost and helpless witnessing a meaningless landscape.

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadow-lands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered. At the top of the hill they stood in the cold and the wind, getting their breath. He looked at the boy. I'm all right, the boy said. The man put his hand on his shoulder and nodded toward the open country below them. He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see. No smoke. Can I see? the boy said. Yes. Of course you can. The boy leaned on the cart and adjusted the wheel. What do you see? the man said. Nothing. He lowered the glasses. It's raining. Yes, the man said. I know. (McCarthy, *The Road*, 6)

In this passage, the man and his son are wandering and they stumble upon a series of buildings, all burned and covered in ashes. The boy asks his dad what he was seeing and he answers "Nothing", even though he was looking at a city which could have perfectly been one of the US's numerous cities. In this passage, the sense of identity of the place is gone, both characters are totally insensitive to a place that time ago had significance. The names of places are totally neglected on purpose throughout the novel. There are very few instances of names. This gives a feeling of disorientation, but most importantly, as if the places had lost its meaning and importance. As if it did not matter where one wishes to go, everything leads to the same hopeless future. The one place mentioned throughout the novel whose name actually holds some meaning, is the coast. To the main characters, the coast means something, protection, safety, hope. Again, it breaks completely with the concept of place introduced by Relph (1979) as well as the popular concept of place that is now held in society. Therefore, despite the fact that, even for a brief moment, the father feels home again when he sees his old

house, it is just a mirage. Before and after that moment, they are completely homeless, both physically and metaphorically.

Sickness related to homelessness in McCarthy's should also be analyzed. Despite the fact that it might not be completely relevant to the overall development of this it becomes vital to fully analyze the topic of homelessness in *The Road*. Throughout the novel, we are presented with the father suffering from a condition or sickness that is not really explained. Little do we know about how or what he is suffering from, but we know two things for sure. He knows his time will come soon, as he just wants to try to keep his son alive for as long as possible, but maybe he has no expectation of being able to in the long run due to his condition. Moreover, we know that his sickness is related to some kind of respiratory failure where his lungs have been affected, maybe because of ash inhaling which is one of the main traits of the apocalypse depicted in the movie, to a point that he starts to cough blood. Linking this sickness depicted in the novel to homelessness, we can see how sickness is lived with when one does not have the means to get help. Hopelessness takes over and one does not really look forward to the future as it is clouded by the fact that almost certainly one will not be there to experience it.

In the US, health care is not free therefore it can only be accessed by people who have the means to afford it. Consequently, homeless people are often left with no way out. They are just trying to do what the father in the novel does, survive for as long as they can without ever really hoping for a possible future as they have no assistance whatsoever for their conditions, therefore, it becomes one of homeless numerous problems to struggle with their sickness as they look helpless to the government that could help them if only they could afford it.





## 5. Conclusions.

Home and homelessness are ideas which are so close but at the same time hold such a complexity that we can barely grasp. The idea of home has been tightly related to the human being. It has been studied by scholars and philosophers alike. Sadly, so has homelessness; that is why I believe it was necessary to analyze McCarthy's novel, one of the most relevant in recent years in order to analyze the usage of the home and homelessness motif within a dystopian novel as well as comparing it with the analysis that previous scholars have made of the matter.

It is not strange that narratives dealing with homelessness specifically, or just having it as a secondary element have always been present throughout history. The curious thing is that they seem to have flourished as of late. This late flourishing of dystopian narratives might be tied to the fact that nowadays we seem to be more concerned with our uncertain future than ever before, and we are constantly trying to predict or warn others about the consequences that the mismanagement of our present might cause in the future.

Looking back to McCarthy's novels, the idea of constant movement and overall lack of attachment to any home is recurrent. Shown in novels such as the border trilogy previously mentioned, *No Country for Old Men* (2005). In them, characters seem to be always on the run. The figure of the traveler well resembles homeless people who have nowhere to go yet they are still always on the move. Nonetheless McCarthy takes a completely new approach to the American road motif filling it with darker, more

dangerous undertones as opposed to the colorful, cheerful colors of hippie clothes which are so tightly connected to the Beat narratives of Kerouak, Ginsberg or Burrows.

McCarthy's narratives have always had some kind of current affair reflected onto them. Nonetheless, one cannot say that he does so on purpose, or that he tries to have some kind of social impact with his narratives as that might be going too far. All in all, the motifs are still there.

The film adaptation of McCarthy's movie dating 2009 just adds fuel to the fire as they clearly resemble a couple of homeless people wandering around the country looking to survive in this world. Despite the fact that thankfully we do not live in the novel's dystopian world it is quite paradoxical that if we were shown this picture without knowing its origin being from the movie and the first thing that would come to mind is to say that they are a couple of homeless people you could find anywhere.

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