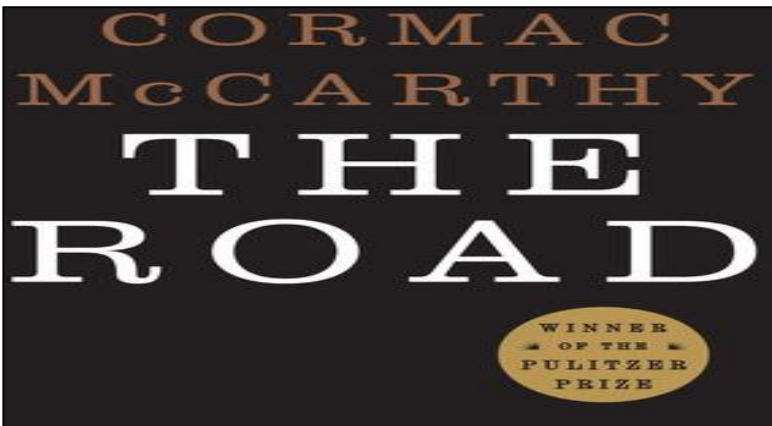




CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S 'THE ROAD'

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INTRODUCTION

McCarthy's novel *The Road* is replete with apocalyptic imagery. Though there is no clear indications of nuclear weapons or radiation, but the physical landscape with its thick blanket of ash; the protagonist's undefined illness, and sudden climatic changes all suggest that nuclear winter has finally entrapped the world and some mysterious danger is looming large on the planet earth.

In the novel the things start unrolling after a catastrophic event that has destroyed the world. Cormac McCarthy here prefers to describe the situation after the cataclysmic event has played havoc with animate and inanimate objects of the earth, not before or during the event. The novel centres around a man and his son and their struggle to survive in the post-apocalyptic America. The world has transformed into nothingness, almost everything vanished from earth as if never existed. No human settlement, no food, no plants, no animals nothing, nothing, nothing. Even

ABSTRACT

In literature symbolism plays a very prominent role as it helps writers convey their ideas in a powerful way. In the novel The Road, Cormac McCarthy uses symbols from the Christian mythology to create the desired literary impact. McCarthy is regarded as one of the major literary voices of America of his time, and The Times ranked his novel The Road first on its list of the 100 best fiction and non-fiction books of the past ten years. It portrays a man and his son looking to get sustenance from the remains of the world left after one of the worst tragedies in the human history. It is a compelling story of a father and his young son who undertake a tedious journey across a landscape blasted by an unspecified catastrophic event that has destroyed most of the civilization and later almost all life on earth. In The Road there is constant conflict between hope and despair. The hope is associated with Christianity and despair with an atheistic understanding of the world. Nevertheless, the novel makes it clear that it is hard to live by faith. This article attempts to throw light on the Christian symbolism and its impact in the novel. Light and darkness are some of the prominent symbols employed by the writer in the book. The novel presents a powerful challenge to both Christian and atheistic views of the world without ever actually rejecting either.

the ever smiling, charming and the vibrant source of livelihood 'hope' got terrible shocking and hid it self out side the sphere of the earth. The question that may come in the mind of the reader is why any one would wish to continue living under such adverse conditions. But that is the beauty of human life. Hoping against hope is the real essence of human life and makes it more valuable and worthwhile. In the novel McCarthy presents powerful arguments for both faith and despair. Hope is associated with Christianity and despair with atheism. McCarthy has written the novel as a Christian allegory which is clearly evident from the fact that he has alluded to the Book of Revelations and other Books in the Bible. Another important point to note here is that McCarthy has assigned some special qualities to his characters that bring to mind the image of Christ or God. The novelist has achieved the mythological allusions through the post-apocalyptic world, the innocent boy and the stopped clocks.

CHRISTIAN IMAGERY:

The novel *The Road* is a literary work that employs Christian imagery extensively as can be observed by the use of frequent motifs of fire and darkness in it. Fire is an intricate and an ambiguous symbol, both in the novel and in Judeo-Christian tradition. Fire obviously has some negative connotations as in hellfire and the fire of lust. For example, in the Old Testament God Himself is twice described as a "consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24, Heb. 12:29 KJV). In that context, fire is a purifying force. In *The Road*, fire is most frequently represented as something destructive that wiped out an entire civilization.

The boy and his father go over the remains of the dead. "A mile on and they began to come upon the dead. Figures half-mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling." (The Road, 203) and the remains of individuals who truly sank into the molten street. When the boy asks why they didn't leave the road, his father tells him they couldn't because "Everything was on fire" (The Road 204). Later, they reach a coastal city in which "The melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake" (291).

The red hot character of the earth's destruction is reminiscent of the wrath of God, as exhibited in various occurrences from *The Bible*. In "Revelation", the "flame of the altar" is cast onto the earth (Rev 8:5) which burns up "the third part of trees" and "all green grass" (Rev 8:7), while in "Genesis", Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed by "brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven" (Gen 19:24).

The man argues that there are "No more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought that the blood cults must have all consumed one another" (The Road 15). Balefire is an archaic term alluding to a reference point or burial service pyre, however it additionally recommends "baleful" and Baal, the name given to various divine beings adored in pre-Christian times.

One of the names given to the devil in the Christian tradition-Beelzebub ("Lord of the Flies") – is derived from the word Baal ("Lord"). The brief reference to blood cults in the novel could be taken to indicate that humanity has been punished for its worship of pagans, a recurrent theme in the Old Testament. However, the cults sprang up in light of the destruction of the earth, rather than causing it.

The man remembers: [P]eople sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road (The Road 32-33). At first, individuals attempted to help each other. It is just over the long haul, and when food turns out to be rare, that the bonds which join individuals together break apart totally. The statement about the godspoke men "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone." (The Road, 33) It could infer that the genuinely authentic and the really greats have all been executed, may be by the worshippers of agnostics. The savagery portrayed here--individuals speared on spikes is reminiscent of the late medieval and early modern period in Europe, when religious oppression took ugly turn of crudity. The ferocity of attacks in the name of religion. which took the innocent and god fearing people by surprise.

The man (referred to as father, whom the son addresses as Papa, strolls in obscurity hiding himself and his son from the fellow human beings as he believes that God has appointed him to protect the boy.

The man performs his self-designated duty in all its sincerity, even by killing another human being so as to save the life of a young child. The mutual trust among the human beings is the major casualty of the prevailing situation as suspicion and distrust has taken a firm grip over the man's mental faculties. The father is always afraid that he is surrounded by wolves ready to consume him and his son.

One night the sound of distant thunder wakes him up : He rose and stood tottering in that cool autistic dark with his arms outstretched for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness. Upright to what? Something anonymous in the darkness of the night, the load or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellites." (The Road, 13)

McCarthy's charming descriptive word "autistic" (14) proposes the trouble of relations in the dull new world. "Fall" (13) suggests the fall of man, the loss of the prelapsarian (the period of innocence before the fall of man) condition of blamelessness portrayed in "Genesis", which is practically equivalent to what has happened to the world in the novel: there has been a second fall from beauty. The passage suggests the collapse of the human values in society, which, though some may think happened suddenly, but the gradual decline in moral values, its predecessor, largely remained unnoticed. Echoing similar sentiments W.B. Yeats in the poem 'Second Coming' laments:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned,"

ALLUSION TO BIBLE:

The post-apocalyptic setting of the novel is the first allusion to the Bible. The post-apocalyptic world, where the father and son wander in search of life, is similar to the one described in the Book of Revelations. In Revelations, catastrophe strikes the world when Jesus is returning. This sudden apocalypse has left the world barren, desolate and unfit for any kind of life to survive. The situation in McCarthy's *The Road* is no different. In the Bible the story of Christ's return is usually portrayed with fire everywhere. Taking a cue from it McCarthy has also portrayed the setting of his book in a similar way where we encounter the burnt world covered with ash.

The second allusion to the Bible is when the clocks stops at 1:17." The clocks stopped at 1:17 A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions." (The Road 45). McCarthy has intentionally shown that clocks stopped at 1:17 because the Bible verse 1:17 describes the perfect and benevolent aspect of God. The verse reads," all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alternation or shadow caused by change". (James 1:17). As per this verse whatever God has given us is perfect. similarly, apocalypse has also struck us as per the God's wish and certainly something good will emerge from it.

Another instance of Allusion to the Bible is the depiction of the Boy as an innocent being. In the Book of Genesis and Creation story we come across the mythological characters Adam and Eve. As Adam is innocent, the serpent instigates his wife Eve to tempt him and give the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The innocent Adam did not have any idea about the fruit or the consequences of eating it. He accepted it out of his extreme trust for his wife. Like Adam, McCarthy's boy is also innocent, unaware of what to expect of this 'fruit'. The fruit to the boy is the post-apocalyptic world, a barren land where there is no plant, no animal, no food or no any sign of life.

The instances and allusions discussed here clearly indicate that the novel *The Road* By Cormac McCarthy is full of religious imagery and themes.

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