
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Traces of Postmodern Vocabulary in the Road by Cormac McCarthy

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| ABSTRACT

The Road, written by the American novelist Cormac McCarthy in 2006, offers a decentring representation of a ruined world in which a handful of people are alive. An alienated father with his lost-in-ambiguity son on the road to survival scours the ruins for food and water, life and meaning, and for hope long faded in a world bereft of all meaning, civilisation, and humanity and supplanted by haunting traumas, cannibalism, and death. The novel has been subject to numerous critical analyses, among which the postmodern facet, albeit a wide window to see through, has received scant critical attention. In terms of periodization and thematic analysis, postmodernism is a late twentieth century movement, which is often deemed as the successor to modernism; what is after the contemporary, it is characterised by fragmentation in style, a general disbelief in social, political, and religious narratives, paranoia, uncertainty, and deconstruction. Thus, McCarthy depicts a paranoia-stricken world, fragmented in style and theme, beleaguered by scepticism and the depthless. However, as mentioned before, the many aspects of postmodernism discernable in the novel have escaped critics' attention. Drawing on the extracted terms by Bennett and Royle, known as the "postmodern vocabulary", seeking to present a synopsis of the terms and see the present work of art through their lenses, the present article not only delineates the traces of postmodern vocabularies at work in the novel but also strives to explore both their possible cause of appearance in and the effect they have wrought on the post-apocalyptic ambience of the novel. It will be concluded that this novel houses almost all the aspects of postmodernism discussed by Bennett and Royle.

| KEYWORDS

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, postmodernism, the postmodern, the postmodern vocabulary

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1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is a contemporary American novelist who has tried his hand successfully at novels which are mostly bent towards human violence and men on the fringe. Endeavouring to portray a post-apocalyptic world deprived of civilisation, tradition and culture, Cormac McCarthy, in *The Road*, depicts a father and his son in a bleak and ruined ambience on a dismal odyssey. McCarthy's *The Road* explores, through the wanderings and struggles of two unnamed or even unnameable characters, the repercussions of repugnant atrocities committed in the world. McCarthy's novel portrays a world which is paradoxical, irrational, fragmented, and, thus, postmodern. Postmodern literary representation is a type of literature that gained prominence after the middle of the twentieth century. While modernism broods over the frame once present, the meaning once accepted, and many other doubts once shunned, postmodernism is concerned with the frame never existed, meaning never found, and certainty never valid. In effect, it embraces the idea of multiplicity as its inevitable character. It repudiates the Draconian Code, here, the totalising gesture of meta-language.

2. Literature Review

In his lead-in to *What is Post-Modernism?* Charles Jencks, the American architectural theorist, claims that "We are well past the age where we can merely accept or reject this new 'ism'; it is too omnipresent for either approach" (Jencks, 1996:6). Taking the

aforementioned into account, briefly touching and putting the set of terms highlighted by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle as a 'postmodern vocabulary', and borrowing terms from the prominent figure of postmodern theories, i.e. Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, this article takes that as its object both to dissect the possible postmodern factors found in the novel and to show where do these postmodern traces come from and where they are heading in the novel.

3. Undecidability

Undecidability, according to Bennett and Royle, is the impossibility of practicality in deciding between two or more interpretations. The undecidable is born out of ambiguity and paradox. It is not paucity or loss of meaning or truth but the multiplicity of the feasible meanings and truths that the postmodern celebrates. Throughout the postmodern, all the invincible values, such as the established values of Truth, Reason, Religion etc., are questioned, re-evaluated, and put in a different light. The postmodern does not exclude the possibility of making decisions. As Derrida presents it, there is neither decision nor any ilk of moral or political responsibility that is not threatened by the 'experience and experiment of the undecidable' (Derrida, 1988; 116).

The import of the conversations, which are all brief, between the father and the son defies any clear and unanimous understanding. They are brief, cut-short, and purposeless.

"Even if you knew what to do, you wouldn't know what to do. You wouldn't know if you wanted to do it or not. Suppose you were the last one left? Suppose you did that to yourself?"

Do you wish you would die?

No. But I might wish I had died. When you're alive, you've always got that ahead of you." (179).

The aforementioned text, which is a conversation between the father and the son, is an undecidable, paradoxical and ambiguous discussion about the knowledge of the coming day and clearly defies any clear interpretation. Thus, when put in the lights cast by the postmodern understanding and dissection of concepts such as paradox and ambiguity discernable in the dialogues, there is more than one possible interpretation of it:

- First, it is not possible to know about tomorrow.
- Second, the mere knowledge about tomorrow does not change today's actions.
- Third, emotions and the state of tomorrow change the mood.
- Fourth, one can be both aware and unaware of something, the denial of classical Aristotelian "laws of thought," which state that one cannot be both A and B.

3.1 "A New Enlightenment."

Theorising in 1944, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer claimed that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (Docherty 1993, 5). It is self-evident that the idea of Enlightenment incorporates the power of reason over all other human senses, the natural and the preternatural. Thus, postmodernists bring into mind that unequivocal reason alone has been used to defend all ilk of oppression, for instance, differences in attitude, in the backgrounds individuals bear and share. On the other hand, any magnificent hegemony holds its own reason as a whip over its people and subjects. However, it must be noted that, for postmodernism, the separating opposition between the rational and irrational must be deconstructed, for rationalism and irrationalism depend on each other for their appearance. According to Jacques Derrida, the postmodern is concerned with dissecting and question 'a new enlightenment'; its focus is on the value and weight of thinking that cannot be reduced to the opposition between the rational and the irrational.

On the road to survival, Cartesian philosophy, even the mere mention of reason, is blatantly neglected; what drew the world onto its edge was most likely contrasting reasons of leaders, ideologies, or even religion. Out of the clash of rationalism is born the irrational, which is, in fact, a new form of Enlightenment. Throughout the novel, McCarthy insinuates that albeit human reason and rationality, along with other human feelings such as morality, happiness and kindness, have failed, love always prevails. The novel is, paradoxically enough, a microcosm of a world not only deprived of reason but also blighted by it, burnt in the flames of madness, and covered in the ashes of gloom. The negation of reason can be seen not only in the thematic aspect of the novel but also in the converses held by the father and the son; pointless. Take the following example from the novel,

"You mean you wish that you were dead.

Yes.

You mustn't say that.

But I do.

Don't say it. It's a bad thing to say.

I can't help it.

I know. But you have to.

How do I do it?

I don't know." (56, 57)

The conversation suggests something unknown, immoral, inevitable, and both reasonable and unreasonable. The very import of the conversation insinuates 'a new enlightenment', a moot point, a concept open to discussion from Plato till Camus and even afterwards. Neither the subject of their conversation nor the way it is held does appear rational; it is a wanton disregard for what is deemed logical.

3.2 Dissemination

- What comes out of the resistance of the postmodern to both rationalism and irrationalism?
- What is the omnipresent stylistic and thematic character of postmodern fiction?
- What is the state of the postmodern, unity or fragmentation?

The key answer to all these questions is *fragmentation*. There are two forms of fragmentation: modern and postmodern. For modernists, fragmentation means the loss of original wholeness, unity, and originality; there was once an origin and unity. The traumatic World Wars deprived the world of its unity and sanity. The origin, found either in the natural or the preternatural, was lost, disregarded, and abhorred. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and many other modern literary works suggest an unbridled sense of nostalgia for a solid form and originality. On the other hand, postmodernism sees this fragmentation as not dependent on the feasibility of an original unity which has been confiscated but as a de facto character of the age. To bring the aforementioned to light, postmodern fragmentation is almost synonymous with, to use, Derrida's term, *dissemination*. In effect, fragmentation is not unique to postmodernism, but dissemination is indigenous to it. Dissemination incorporates a sense of diffusing and spreading, as in the spreading of seeds or 'seeds'. Dissemination is a difusal of origins and ends, of identity, centre and presence. In other words, in Nietzschean words, the central meaning, the true meaning of things, are unattainable; one can hardly distinguish between that which is the one true centre and core meaning of things; truth and lie are two branches of one stem. The inability to centralise one seed, concept, and frame leads to the shattered pieces of a mirror which was never whole. Postmodern fragmentation is not with or without origins; in other words, it is dissemination without any assurance of a centre or destination. In other words, according to Derrida, dissemination is the play of meanings; an unequivocal meaning cannot be assigned to it. However, Derrida is against defining or labialising dissemination; it cannot be seen as 'this' or 'that'. Any solid definition of dissemination would immobilise it and stop its own dissemination.

The road taken by the father and his son, together with the dialogues held between them, are symbolic; in being symbolic, they escape any fixed meaning or interpretation. The novel's title, like *Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, shuns a single meaning; is it a road to survival, a symbolic word for life, or a road to perdition? Thus is the whole development of narrative throughout the novel; it is replete with multiple decentred semantic and thematic centres. The novel opens with a scene that could be understood by dint of biblical, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and self-referential contexts. The word '*darkness*', for example, which is used constantly, bears multifaceted interpretations; biblically speaking, on one hand '*darkness*' is used as metonymy for the nonexistence of the world, "*The earth was without form and void; darkness was on the face of the deep*" (Gen. 1:2). On the other hand, it is synonymous with ignorance, "*he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness,*" (John. 8:12). To cast light on another feasible interpretation of the word *darkness*, Milton draws on St. Basil, describing hell as "*No light, but rather darkness visible*" (PL. 1.63).

There are, as mentioned above, numerous interpretations of a single symbolic word in a novel full of symbols. However, every possible interpretation of a word gives birth to innumerable interpretations, and thus, the seeds of meaning are disseminated.

Last but not least is the concept of fragmented postmodern self or subject, which is also born out of the hydra-centred cultural and social womb; One of the most prevalent and ubiquitous concepts prey to this fragmentation. The postmodern social, economic, cultural etc. conditions have equated the living subject with a non-human selfless object; in other words, we do witness an insidious objectification of the subjects. What makes the two unidentifiable characters, the father and his son, prone to this postmodern objectification is their inability to claim freedom and autonomy in the face of dehumanising catastrophes of the post-apocalyptic world of the novel. Their stupefied wandering and carriage, together with the broken conversations, reveal the intense of similarity with and metamorphose into objects around them.

3.3 Little and Grand Narratives

Jean-Francois Lyotard made one of the ineluctable distinctions in the postmodern; 'grand narratives' and 'little narratives'. Grand narratives are both authoritative and authoritarian ideas, beliefs and rules. Such grand narratives as Marxism, Communism, and the Enlightenment strive to draw a blueprint for everything, highlighting the role of the economy, establishing so-called egalitarian society, and following reason. For Lyotard, these eminent ideologies are downplayed by postmodernism. On the other hand, little narratives, which are sketches of daily outlines, present local and more thorough explanations of individual events. Little or micro-narratives are fragmented, non-marginalising and non-authoritarian. For Lyotard, within the postmodern, little narratives kill grand narratives.

The Road offers a creative deviation even more distressing than the aforementioned states of grand and little narratives; that is, their complete absence. Throughout the novel, both the absence of grand narratives or their fall and the shattering of little narratives are discernable. Neither grand nor little narratives could be said to dominate the lives. A ruined world deprived of reason, or even ruined by dints of reason; no religion can explain the atrocity; no school of thought can breathe hope and meaning into it. The miserable conditions the father and the son walk through insinuate the state of crisis the master codes are in. All greatness once bestowed meaning upon the now absurd world is forsaken and desiccated:

"Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night." (28).

Additionally, even the little narratives, those private and personal sources of form and meaning, are disappeared. Their absence makes the world reminiscent of that of Camus's depicted in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942),

"In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. ... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity."

The divorce between the subject and his narratives mentioned by Camus is to be seen in the conversations held between the father and the son too,

"He stopped. What happened to your flute?"

I threw it away.

You threw it away?

Yes.

Okay.

Okay." (168-169)

Not only structural but also thematic disequilibrium wrought in the absence of narratives is implicitly presented here. Symbolically speaking, according to biblical and heroic stories, flutes, along with other wind instruments such as pipes and reeds, were played for mourning and rejoicing, creation and intensification of poetic sense, the symbol of feeling, life and death. The desensitisation of the world, throwing away that which could breathe life into their lives and resuscitate the death-ridden civilisation, prevents the possibility of any so-called redemptive and religious narrative.

3.4 Depthlessness

Lauded for his analysis of current cultural trends by dint of Jean Baudrillard's term "simulation" or "simulacrum", Fredrick Jameson labels postmodern culture depthless. Asserting that postmodern cultural trends tend to be expressions of deeper philosophical and economic structures of avant-garde forms of capitalism, Jameson avers that postmodernity transforms all art forms into commodities. The aforesaid commodification of that which is called art insinuates a culture of surface rather than that of depth. The omission of depth paves the way for a culture where the surface meaning and appearance are all that is of consequence. The subject lacks unity and is fragmented, and disunity and fragmentation is what he calls the culture of pastiche. It is the stylistic state where the repetition of already used older styles becomes a style in itself, and there is no "prototype", only copies. On the other hand, Brian McHale represents a fundamentally cataclysmic shift towards the standpoint of postmodern fiction; while formerly investigated in terms of epistemology, McHale claims that postmodern fiction is to be evaluated through the lenses of ontology. This rearrangement of perspective and framing questions such as "Which world is this?" or "What is to be done in it?" avails the reader/audience to unravel the unenviable answers to ontological aspects of the novel's theme and meaning, which are meaning-making and potent adjectives followed by "less", i.e. depthless, meaningless, etc.

The random structural and thematic dissonance of combination throughout the novel is to be seen from the very first lines it discloses. Structurally speaking, *The Road* shakes up the conventional narrative modes by embedding seemingly discordant styles, namely biblical and colloquial; the novel's beginning is a deconstruction of the strategy applied by nineteenth and early twentieth century novelists who started the narrative from a completely detached and external perspective and, endeavoured to impart a sense of the beginning. In deconstructing the modern and pre-modern narrative strategies, the novel first repeats and then parodies (in other words, betrays) the same intended strategies. Thus, the style becomes bereft of originality and unity, for the use of multi-layered minimalist techniques as a poetic vehicle to fabricate pastiche of styles, the cataclysmic change and hybridisation of styles make the audience baffled.

3.5 The Unpresentable

Postmodernism's challenge of what is real and what is a copy, what is present and what is presented opens up a new gaping and unbridled horizon to the world of narration. "Nothing to be done." all is dictated to, drawn for, and concluded with us. A shattered, paradoxical and ambivalent state defying any attempt at labialisation rules within and over the novel. And the exhausted objects and dilapidated buildings depict, as Albert Camus observes, the quality of life the inhabitants are living. Similar to Samuel Beckett's paradox "I can't go on, I'll go on" (*The Unnameable*, 418), where there is no distinct protocol of (re)presentation, mimesis, and temporality, *The Road* makes itself unpresentable by deviating from clear-cut modes of representation:

"He looked at his father. What are our long term goals? he said.

What?

Our long term goals.

Where did you hear that?

I don't know.

No, where did you?

You said it.

When?

A long time ago.

What was the answer?

I don't know.

Well. I don't, either. Come on. It's getting dark."

In breaking away from the clear, logical mode of narrative, McCarthy presents the unpresentable in the presentation itself. Shunning the concerted modes of presentation and re-presentation, the novel abstains from the tantalising aroma of nostalgia for the unattainable, unpresentable, "the sublime," and "the unnameable".

4. Conclusion: Decentring

In conclusion, were it feasible for postmodernism to coin a word which could house all the terms delineated in the present article, it would be "decentring". For Derrida, decentring is "the stated abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin"; it challenges the logo-centric, the ethnocentric, and the phallogocentric. A close reading of Ihab Hassan when he summarises the postmodern as a litany of vocabularies preceded either by "de" or by "di", viz. deconstruction, desterrance, decentring, dispersal, dissemination, de-sedimentation, and disappearance, would unravel even more postmodern aspects of *The Road*.

The novel, from very scratch, curtails any possibility of stable meaning, of making sense. The unnamed and "unnameable" father and his son fight their way through a meaningless and "depthless" world in which all the "grand narratives" are shattered into smithereens; there is no longer any trace of enlightenment, reason and sense. The world of McCarthy lacks the one centre to which one could pin his meaning-making anchor; instead, the centres are "disseminated".

To sum it up, by dint of setting, plot, dialogues, themes and symbolism, the novel not only decentres all the inevitable centres in modern time but also suffers from the now decentred modern concepts; in fact, the surfeit of pre-postmodern or modern elements has ushered Cassandra into the novel and left its world in utter ruin.

"What's the bravest thing you ever did?"

He spat into the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said.

Really?

No. Don't listen to me. Come on, let's go."

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