A POST-APOCALYPTIC RESPONSE TO 9/11: CORMAC MCCARTHY’S THE ROAD

Abstract

The events of September 11 have revived an earlier literary genre: the post-apocalyptic novel. The quantity of the films and novels produced shows the shock, fear, anxiety, grief has been long-termed and that resulted in many people’s naming their experience as ‘apocalyptic’, like the attack itself. American author Cormac McCarthy has echoed the feelings of many in his tenth novel The Road. The author even believes that the apocalyptic imagination is now different as the sense ‘nothing will be the same again’ has been engraved on the minds. In addition to the attacks, the Iraq War in the following months contributed to the immense awe and shock. This article examines how Cormac McCarthy’s novel reveals the psychological and sociological changes in American society following the attacks in 2001.

Keywords: September 11, 9/11, Cormac McCarthy, The Road, Post-Apocalyptic, United States of America
11 Eylül Saldırılara Bir Post-Apokaliptik Tepki: Cormac McCarthey’nin The Road (Yol) Romanı

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: 11 Eylül, Cormac McCarthy, The Road, Post-Apokaliptik, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri.

He woke before dawn and watched the gray day break. Slow and half opaque. (McCarthy 10)

Introduction

The English literary critic James Wood argues that “in addition to the 9/11 novel, and the 9/11 novel that is pretending not to be a 9/11 novel, an old genre has been reawakened by new fears: the post-apocalyptic novel” (52). Though the genre has been known since 1826, the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 have revived the use of it. Additionally, since 9/11, more than fifty post-apocalyptic films have been produced. Taken together, the total number of books and films on the re-emerging theme produced since 2001 suggests the immensity of the fear experienced on that day and on those following.

One of the best ways to understand the extent of public anxiety during and after 9/11 is to consult psychological sources. The psychoanalyst Charles B. Strozier, who is also the author of Until the Fires Stopped Burning, expresses his view that the events of 9/11, “where the fires were not entirely put out until Dec. 20, 2001” (140), cannot be called apocalyptic but that the experience of it can. Having conducted several interviews with people who saw the attacks, he has come to the conclusion that

indeed, the culture of fear that emerged out of 9/11 has to be understood in the context of our apocalyptic experience, as much as the event itself. Because it was so intense, so awful, such a surprise and so totalistic, our experience of it was apocalyptic. But we have to distinguish between what the event actually was and our experience of it. Psychologically, the felt experience of the people within the disaster was that it was an apocalyptic event. It was not: it was monumental, and it was an apocalyptic experience, but it was not an apocalyptic event (qtd. in Peay, “The Psychological Meaning Of 9/11: Why That Day Felt Like ‘The End of The World’”).
The Road (Yol) 
Romant

Strozier here states an objective and a quite clear comment on what apocalyptic feeling and an apocalyptic event is. He suggests that there should be no confusion between the perception and the phenomenon, which is rather unmistakable. His mild opposition to the perception of 9/11 as an apocalyptic event is also related to the nuclear age:

Apocalyptic dread is a new thing in the nuclear age, because we no longer need God to end things: We can end the world, and we know it. Therefore, nuclear weapons changed us psychologically in ways that we're just beginning to understand. It's one of the intriguing but terrifying aspects of 9/11. 2,479 people were killed. I hate to say it, but there have been events where far more were killed. So it’s not the numbers that were lost that makes 9/11 so huge. It’s when it happened and how it happened and our experience of it that led to such an incredible psychological and political perfect storm after 9/11 (qtd. in Peay, “The Psychological Meaning Of 9/11: Why That Day Felt Like ‘The End of The World’”).

Strozier’s interpretation is highly illuminating as it matches a great part of society’s general impression and reaction and it helps to empathize with Cormac McCarthy and to understand his intention in writing The Road. The author’s tenth novel, which was also adapted to film in 2009, has been regarded one of the best examples of post-apocalyptic fiction. Published in 2006, it almost immediately aroused huge attention and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007. The novel successfully depicts the condition of humankind in the wake of a disastrous incident that causes not just material but also psychological destruction in addition to an imaginary picture of a wasteland. It is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape in which almost all the possible reconnections of any one individual with the past have been erased, resulting in a lost sense of place for the disoriented residents who have experienced life both in the past and post-apocalyptic era – except for the children –. In the wake of an undefined cataclysm that has transformed nature into a bleak and barren land, two unnamed protagonists, a father and his young son, head on a journey, as they follow a route leading to an unknown south, hoping to encounter some remains of the lost civilization or to shelter in a coastal place where the climate is expected to be less harsh. Throughout the novel, the reader finds her/himself in an indeterminate setting possibly somewhere in the U.S. at an unspecified time. The absence of any exact time-frame, location or explanation for the preliminary catastrophe is a crucial aspect of the novel. The timelessness is especially important as it offers a connection with the unexpectedness of 9/11 attacks and the author’s intention for this piece. These remarks about the novel suggest that just like several people, as an American, the author himself was affected by the suddenness of what happened in the heart of America on September 11, 2001. As a father, the author’s tenth piece can be considered as a reflection of feelings of thousands of families who somehow experienced the outcomes of the attacks in Manhattan.

Among the various reactions to the attacks expressed by writers and critics, that of Cormac McCarthy provides arguably one of the strongest links between the events and literature. In his very first interview on television, responding to Oprah Winfrey’s comment “If we had read this book twenty-five or twenty years ago, it would have seemed futuristic, but something about it feels ominous and real”, Cormac McCarthy provides arguably one of the strongest links between the events and literature: “You know, I think it is maybe since 9/11 that people’s emotions are more concerned about apocalyptic issues, we are not used to that” (“Oprah Winfrey Show”). Additionally, when Winfrey asked him “Had you not had this son at this time, this book wouldn’t have been written?” the author replied “No. Absolutely not. Never would it have
occurred to me to write, try to write a book about a father and a son” (“Oprah Winfrey Show”). In the same interview, he further indicates as the starting point of the novel that

I just had this image of fires upon the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy so I wrote these pages and I woke up one morning and realized that it was a book and it was about that man and that little boy (“Oprah Winfrey Show”).

McCarthy “does not hesitate to make use of his life experience in literature” (Özdemir 194) and the connection he has set between the novel and the public are mostly in terms of parental manners and that’s why throughout the narration the reader can easily identify with the father’s feelings. He seems to be among the people who believed on America’s superpower but later appalled with the 9/11 attacks. Like the majority, the writer thinks that apocalyptic imagination has developed and changed its form in the aftermath of 9/11. Interestingly, the unspecified reason of the cataclysm in The Road may be a reference to the elusiveness and shocking expect of the attacks.

Clinical psychologist Randall Marshall states that “many of our patients’ experiences had an apocalyptic nature: They not only thought their own lives were in danger, but that their entire community” (qtd. in “Gaps in Mental Health Care Seen after Terrorist Attacks”). Similarly, on the tenth anniversary of September 11 it was anticipated that “emotional trauma will be part of the vicissitudes of daily life for many people, particularly those who are most vulnerable” (Lieberman and Neria, “Coping with Disaster: The Mental Health Effects of Trauma”). Therefore, for many individuals, this long-lasting emotional trauma resulting from the apocalyptic experience of 9/11 is likely to endure for many years and will continue to interrupt their daily lives.

In the literary world, some writers also drew attention to continuation of the psychological uneasiness due to the apocalyptic side of the events. Ian McEwan echoes this sentiment when he says “Yesterday’s apocalyptic scenes far outstripped anything Hollywood has ever imagined. Amid the confusion, only one thing seemed certain: [...] the world would never be the same again” (“Beyond Belief”). The impression that the event has left has resulted in some people sharing a common feeling that the term ‘apocalypse’ has come to best define that day, as Joseph O’Neill has also stated in The Netherland. O’Neill conveys the sense of apocalypse through his Dutch protagonist Hans as he experiences mixed feelings in the city of New York, to which he has moved from London. His picture of the new face of the city explicitly renders his startled condition following the attacks:

Very little about anything seemed intelligible or certain, and New York itself—that ideal source of the metropolitan diversion that serves as a response to the largest futilities – took on a fearsome, monstrous nature whose reality might have befuddled Plato himself. We were trying to avoid what might be termed a historic mistake. We were trying to understand, that is, whether we were in a preapocalyptic situation, like the European Jews in the thirties or the last citizens of Pompeii, or whether our situation was merely near-apocalyptic, like that of the Cold War inhabitants of New York, London, Washington, and for that matter, Moscow (29).

Here, while the author emphasizes that those events in history had quasi-apocalyptic effects, the impression of the aftermath of the attacks was no different and would rank alongside
the earlier historic events. Similar comparisons were also made in the very early days after the attacks. In one article, the architecture critic Herbert Muschamp wrote:

As I gazed down on lower Manhattan from the 44th floor of a residential highrise, the scene brought to mind Karl Brulloff’s “Last Day of Pompeii.” The small figures below, running north through Foley Square, evoked the frozen panic of fossilized Romans trapped by ash as they fled the eruption of Vesuvius. Or Bruegel the Elder’s “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (“Art/Architecture; Filling the Void: A Chance to Soar”).

Though seven years separate the two articles, the feeling of shocked awe that they express evidently remains the same. Although this reaction was inevitably first conveyed via the media, it has been most fully developed in narrative and film. One of the stories in Ulrich Baer’s collection published a year after the attacks also draws attention to a sense of fear that is close to the horror described by O’Neill: “Coming up the West Side Highway is a post-apocalyptic exodus, men and women wandering north, walking up the center of the road, following the white lines, one foot in front of the other, mechanized” (Homes 153).

The above examples illustrate the obvious extent to which many authors’ works reflect real-life, post-apocalyptic sensations in the aftermath of the attacks. The traumatic spaces in witnesses’ experience have continued to be represented in some of the novels as post-apocalyptic traumascapes.

The Road and 9/11

The mesmerizing apocalyptic view of 9/11 was and is shared by people who personally witnessed the fall of the towers and by the masses that rushed to watch it on television. As in post-apocalyptic films, people ran to escape from the disaster while finding it hard to believe that it could be happening. Several critics have linked the mass panic of New Yorkers on 9/11 with various aspects of the story line of The Road. While thousands of people were obsessed by the images after the demolition of the towers for several months and some even for years, the Iraq war in the aftermath triggered and contributed to the fear and shock. These feelings are almost explicitly given in the storyline of the novel with the father and son struggling to survive the cannibals’ attacks in the deserted land:

You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?

Yes.

[…]

After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We’re still the good guys.

And we always will be.

Yes. We always will be.

Okay (80).
Although the unnamed two neither have enough equipment to stay safe under the harsh weather conditions nor to defend themselves against cannibals, thieves and killers, still under these conditions, they aim to be ‘good guys’. The father only resorts to violence when he needs to protect his son from threats, and even at these life-threatening moments the boy is still in favour of keeping peaceful and remain the good guys. In a scene where they find a bunker which is an old shelter, the two have the temporary opportunity to live normal just like the days in pre-apocalypse. This bunker becomes the most ‘proper’ and safest place they have encountered during their post-apocalyptic journey providing them with the opportunity to bathe, sleep and eat relatively comfortably. When the boy thinks about the ex-owners of this bunker, he questions if it is correct to use the things inside and asks his father:

Is it okay for us to take it? (a can of peach)

Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to.

They were the good guys?

Yes. They were.

Like us.

Like us. Yes (148).

Despite the depressing setting of the novel, Cormac McCarthy’s ultimately positive message is that, at best, moral values may remain unchanged, no matter what the circumstances. For Carole Judge, it “operates as a vector for human decrepitude, where boundaries and morality are being reflected” (23). In other words, it serves to test humanity’s moral values even when the world is closest to its end. On the other hand, not very long after the release of the novel, criticisms did not only draw attention to the novel’s psychological content but also to its political content mostly of the dominant belief that America is a superpower. “America’s fear of ‘falling’ in the post 9/11 era” (Bragard et all 4) and the vows to be “good” nationwide comes into existence in this literary piece as a reminder to be the followers of Bush’s speech that highlights the vow to liberate United States of America from ‘the bad’: “We have been warned there are evil people in this world. […] My administration has a job to do and we are going to do it. We will rid the world of the evil-doers” (qtd in Perez-Rivas, “Bush vows to rid the world of evil-doers”).

The above-mentioned dialogues from the novel back and contribute to the political side of the novel since it is like an echo to Bush’s speech on the justification of the Iraq War. Besides the novel’s mention on the invasion of Iraq, some critics also highlight on further political, global and even ecological issues. The opportunity to read and criticise the novel by such flexibility might make it among the literary sources that provide crucial historical content of the post-9/11 era. John Cant writes on how the novel fits into the post-9/11 context. He considers it in both local and universal terms and states that “The apocalyptic tone of the novel reflects the mood of America following the destruction of the World Trade Centre (if not its religiosity) just as Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian reflected the mood generated by the Vietnam War” (331). He also observes that “The Road seems to reflect the mood of fear that has permeated the Western mind in the first decade of the twenty-first century” (332). As for the resemblance of the novel to the recent political and global occurrences, Cant refers to the attack on the Twin Towers, the war in Iraq, the fear associated with Abu Ghraiib and Guantanamo Bay and the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina (332).
Like Cant, Chris Walsh deals with The Road in a broad perspective ranging from political to spatial considerations. Politically, he puts forward reasons for making a connection between the novel and the attacks. He argues that The Road evokes the bleak sensibility prevailing in post-September 11 America, the sorry mess of a war in Iraq which represents a grim note on the history of American exceptionalism, the spectre of global warming and ecological disaster, and the implications of economic globalization and trans-nationalism (53).

Walsh’s references to the Iraq war can be linked to the widespread use of ‘bad guys’ that “infilt rated our national conversation, and its continued prevalence serves as a testament to the ways trauma has warped the nation” (Hayes, “After Osama bin Laden’s Death, an End to Bad Guys”). The two protagonists’ determination to uphold righteousness against the evil of the post-apocalyptic world may have been intended to imply that “from here forward, it is the bad guys who need to be afraid every waking moment” (Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Talk Later”). Another repetition of bad guys, which are given as ‘cannibals strolling’ in the novel, is interesting and relevant to the aforementioned criticisms as it once again refers to the boy’s desire to keep being good and shaping in his mind what it means to be bad:

Are they gone, Papa?
Yes, they are gone.
Did you see them?
Yes.
Were they the bad guys?
Yes, they were the bad guys.
There’s a lot of them, those bad guys (97).

The unexpected events resulted in the emergence of an unusual kind of behaviour in terms of growing expectations from the future. Sorrow and anxiety resulted in a sense of hope that has become a dominant feeling. People started to develop differing senses such as “guilt, anger or radical hope as a way of ‘using’ the event in the life continued” (Brassett 16). Moreover, the feelings and thoughts might even be in favour of “a simple narrative of global hope: hope that we can learn, hope that we can improve, hope that we can make the world a better place” (Brassett 16). The differentiations and labelling between good and bad gained more significance due to the case of increasing vulnerability in the aftermath of the attacks. This matter has brought about special importance on the children. That is, throughout the USA there has been even more attention to children than previously as symbols of hope. Peter Pufall and Richard Unsworth note this growing tendency in the media:

Mass media now reach into children’s lives in unanticipated ways. […] This public tragedy has alerted us all – scholars, parents, public policymakers, and politicians alike – to the reality that the lives of children are no longer bounded by their homes, schools, or neighbourhoods (3).

Once can deduce that in order to continue a better world after catastrophic destructions, infants are seen among the important agents due to their good hearts and pure emotions. In another scene in the novel when the father and the boy encounter an old man called Ely, the boy wants
to help him by holding his hand and giving him something to eat despite his father’s warning. When all three start to have a conversation in the evening, Ely reminds them of the barrenness around in all senses except for the presence of the child:

I live like an animal. You don’t want to know the things I’ve eaten. When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.

You thought he was an angel?

I didn’t know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn’t know that would happen (183).

The old man’s reaction upon seeing the boy is curious because for him, the boy’s presence is like a miracle. Getting help and seeing a smiling face would be the last things the old man could ask for in such no-land but the little boy makes this happen as he has inner sentiments.

Upbeat news like “American Musician turns 9/11 grief into musical hope,” gloom-defying books with titles like Faces of Hope: Babies Born on 9/11, or a documentary film named Reclaiming Hope in a Changed World, are all of which reflect the increasing desire for hope. Significantly, the note on the back cover of Naman’s book, Faces of Hope, features Carl Sandburg’s words about babies as a hope-inspiring symbol: “A baby is God’s opinion that the world should go on” (qtd in Sandburg 7). There are also families who, after the attacks and in keeping with the traditional values of the first settlers, especially their daughters – ‘Hope’ or, motivated by a sense of having survived a cataclysm and wishing to cling to life more strongly, decided to have a child with the expectation of making a new beginning. Here, it is worth noting that the practice of naming daughters ‘Hope’ revives a seventeenth-century American Puritan tradition and so this endorses the upholding of the traditional values of the first settlers (Ateşçi Koçak 111).

The symbolic use of the fire in the novel matches up with the recent hope tendencies throughout the country. Though there is continual hardship in the setting, the reader is reminded to be hopeful as there is a child who ‘carries the fire’:

What is it, Papa?

Nothing. We’re okay. Go to sleep.

We are 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 (87).

In the novel, most of the time it is the boy as a faithful follower of hope. He gives a lifetime promise that no matter how wicked the conditions; he does not abandon his good intentions. Though the father protects his son against all the earthly hazards, he at the same time wants his boy to keep dreaming that good things will happen by keeping the fire inside:

We would ever eat anybody, would we?
No. of course not.
Even if we were starving?
We’re starving now. …
But we wouldn’t.
No. We wouldn’t.
No matter what.
No. no matter what.
Because we’re the good guys.
Yes.
And we’re carrying the fire.
And we’re carrying the fire. Yes (136).

The repetition of the fire metaphor might aim to remind the reader not to lose hope even at worst times because the author’s use of the fire symbol with the child coincides with the minds of the ones who think that innocence of a child will cure the uneasiness and fall down of the time. There are also some families who had previously hesitated to have a child totally changed their minds after the attacks. In expressing her changed opinion about having a baby a woman from New York explicitly likens Ground Zero to a post-apocalyptic place / site / zone:

As I stand on line at the morgue, [...] I can’t stop envisioning myself with a child — with my child by my side, my child whom I will nurture, comfort, mentor, love, and protect, who will inspire me to work harder to make the world a safer and better place, a world in which such a terrible thing won’t happen again. [...] I promise myself that when things have settled down a bit, when John and I can open our apartment windows without breathing in thick, overwhelmingly putrid smoke, when the National Guard ceases patrolling our block, when he and I can walk freely in our neighbourhood without having to show I.D, [...] the subject of our becoming parents hasn’t been put to bed, after all. And I feel hopeful— confident (Eidus 88).

Here Janice Eidus expresses the sentiment common to many people who in various ways witnessed the same unexpected grief and later chose to believe in the power of a new-born to somehow remove the horror of the post-apocalyptic landscape they had beheld. Similar thought is seen in the first pages of The Road as the father glances over the colourless land filled with ashes:

Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land.
He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke (3).

Being the father’s sole warrant, the boy again is seen as the messenger of the purest intentions in addition to the holy meaning he has been assigned. Just like the opening pages of the novel,
the final pages of the novel again fits into the aura of post-9/11. Though the father leaves his son as he dies, he keeps advising his son to keep being hopeful as he indeed believes that goodness will be with him in the end as long as he carries the fire. In his last moments, the father advises him to continue being on the road until he finds good people:

I want to be with you.

You cant

Please.

You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It is inside you. It was always there. I can see it. … You’ll be okay.

You’re going to be lucky (298).

Three days after his father’s death, the boy continues his way to the south and on the road, he comes across a man who has a family. Suspicious at first, the boy asks whether the man, who is a father at the same time, is a good guy (302) and when he tells that he has a family with a boy and a girl, the boy is at last convinced that he is one of the good guys (304) and decides to join them.

The novel closes with an ending that could be defined as almost happy under the circumstances of the ashen land. The final pages do not go against the current flow of the novel as it gives the moral of the importance of familial unity with children, which several American citizens have longed for post the attacks.

Conclusion

The attacks of September 11, 2001, will be remembered among the most destructive events of American history. Such remembrance has led to the appearance of more than a hundred novels. Among them, this post-apocalyptic novel can be seen as exemplifying and illustrating the collective response of people who have witnessed a world-shattering event. The portrayal of a city devastated by an unknown cause in addition to the author’s statement about why he decided to write this novel, which is given in this article, shows that it has contributed to the understanding of why 9/11 was, and still is, perceived as a post-apocalypse by some people even six years after the attacks. The fictional framework of The Road is inspired by child-centric parental feelings similar to those of people who sought to bond with each other and to find encouragement in having babies in order to transcend the September 11 cataclysm with its apocalyptic overtones and its destruction of the pre-9/11 American outlook. While reflecting the fear and panic that a majority of the American population experienced following the 9/11 destruction, the novel has also become a vehicle for reflecting the American imagination that contemplated on the worst scenario for a long time reflecting that part of the American imagination that has long viewed the past and the future in a pessimistic light. Therefore, this post-apocalyptic novel “stands in
the midst of crisis and between two catastrophes: one historical (remembered and suffered), and one imagined (desired and feared)” (Berger 35). It shows the reader that the presence of a child, is enough to be more optimistic about the future as the road will in the end lead the survivors, which are indeed few, to better ways out as a possible rescue from the desolated space. The novel cannot be thought separately from the author’s own experience about the happening on and after September 11. Political references in the novel make it a literary work that provides political and sociological source.

KAYNAKLAR


