

The Concept of Cannibalism in Cormac McCarthy's *THE ROAD*

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Abstract- *The novel "The Road" by Cormac McCarthy presents a dark world where cannibalism plays a fundamental role. This article briefly explores the concept of cannibalism in Western intellectual history, which helps us understand how McCarthy uses this theme in his work. Cannibalism has been viewed as a powerful moral force throughout history, representing either sinful or the complete opposite of society. The discussion of cannibalism becomes even more significant in light of the emergence of transhumanism as a field of philosophical and literary study, as it helps us define what it means to be human and who falls within that category. By highlighting the theme of cannibalism, we can also revisit the human/nature dichotomy and consumer culture, providing new avenues of exploration for McCarthy scholars. Cannibalism is seen as the imbalance between nature and human species. It is considered as a myth in literature. Many authors featured types of cannibalistic representation in their works such as Homer's *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and Melville's *Moby Dick*.*

Indexed Terms- *Transhumanism, Cannibalism, Nature, Human, Myth, Culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

Interpretations of Cormac McCarthy's novel "The Road" often focus on the theme of cannibalism, but many critics view it as a symbol for other concepts such as consumerism or the act of "othering" - a technique of separating people from the rest of society. However, important arguments for moral relativism and cannibalism, like those proposed by Montaigne, are often ignored. Additionally, the idea of cannibalism has historically served as a starting point for other intellectual inquiries into the development of civilization. While most postcolonial

discussions of cannibalism adopt William Arens' theory that ceremonial cannibalism was a concept invented by Europeans and imposed on the Americas, this view does not fully capture the essence of "The Road." This is because the post-apocalyptic world depicted in McCarthy's novel is vastly different from the historical world of the Americans.

This article adds to the scholarship on McCarthy by focusing on the theme of cannibalism, and places it within a historical context before drawing on the work of modern anthropologists and literary historians to support its analysis of McCarthy's novel, *The Road*. Although the idea of cannibalism appears in McCarthy's earlier work, such as *Outer Dark*, this article concentrates on *The Road* and offers insights that could be applied to other texts. While the terms "cannibalism" and "anthropophagy" are technically different, they are used interchangeably in this article for convenience, as modern usage often treats them as synonymous. It should be noted, however, that "anthropophagy" specifically refers to the utilization of human flesh, while "cannibalism" has a broader definition that includes the consumption of members of one's own species.

In his article titled "Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation," Dominy argues that literary and cultural criticism of cannibalism demonstrates it as a literary device that operates in two ways: firstly, to highlight the contrast between European civilization and the "barbarism" of other races and secondly, as a metaphor for the greed of consumer capitalism. This trend emerged as luxury goods became more accessible and the middle class grew. However, the discourse that uses anthropophagy as a measure of civilization has also generated a relativistic response from the beginning, as exemplified by Montaigne's essay "On Cannibalism." In 1592, Pascal met with Brazilian indigenous people in Rouen, France, and

contrasted their supposed barbarism of eating prisoners of war with the Portuguese soldiers' heinous actions of enslaving them.

Despite reports of cannibalistic tendencies, Montaigne argues that modern Western society is actually more savage than the recently discovered Americas. In fact, Montaigne's sources suggest that some of the more cruel Brazilians abandoned eating captive prisoners of war in favour of using torture techniques learned from the Portuguese to inflict greater punishment on their enemies. While Montaigne acknowledges the barbarity of the Brazilians' cannibalistic practices, he criticizes Westerners for turning a blind eye to even worse behaviors happening within their own society. As he states, "I am not sorry that we should take notice of the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am sorry that, seeing so clearly into their faults, we should be so blind to our own" (239). Montaigne's essay is noteworthy for its introspection, rejection of xenophobia, and above all, its moral relativism

Before discussing *The Road*, I will examine some important cannibalistic discourses. Evidence for each of Goldman's three categories can be easily found. Some characters in the novel resort to cannibalism to survive, while instances of exocannibalism, where one group preys on another, are implied by the phrase "postcolonial uncertainty". McCarthy's portrayal of cannibalism does not involve "this tableau of the slain and the devoured" from *The Road* (91) dominant culture imposing it on the others as a means of intellectual liberation for the postcolonial subject. Rather, it is presented as the inherent reality of nature, which cannot be denied and the devoured" from *The Road* (91) and the gruesome discovery of human beings preserved as food in the basement of a home that the man and boy stumble upon. The "blood cults" in the book may be connected to end of cannibalism. Myths from various cultures suggest the need for sacrifice to counter the land's infertility, which can only be replenished by blood (Goldman 8-9).

The readers of *The Road* are transported well beyond Arens' postcolonial uncertainty. McCarthy's portrayal of cannibalism does not involve the dominant culture imposing it on the Other as a means of intellectual

liberation for the postcolonial subject. Rather, it is presented as the inherent reality of nature, which cannot be denied. The depiction of cannibalism in *The Road* questions conventional notions of what is natural and what it means to be human. In the novel, nature has completely disappeared, which is significant because modern society often regards nature as something to be safeguarded (as evidenced by the Environmental Protection Agency), appreciated for its beauty, or studied as a specialized subject. However, in *The Road*, the destruction of the environment and human pollution no longer pose a threat to nature as it is perceived in untouched wilderness areas.

The world has been permanently altered by a catastrophic event, although it is unclear from the story whether it was caused by humans or not. Regardless, both the father and the boy represent one of the last remaining groups of humans, while the natural world has also been destroyed. The father ultimately dies from respiratory issues brought on by the polluted air and lack of fertile land, symbolizing the end of humanity's connection to the natural world. This is further illustrated by the traveler who is struck by lightning and the numerous trees that threaten the man and the boy throughout their journey.

The cataclysmic event has caused a permanent transformation. Although it's unclear in the story whether humans caused it, the consequences are similar for the two characters. The father and the son represent one of the few remaining groups that can still be considered human, while the other half of the dichotomy, nature, has also ceased to exist. The father ultimately dies due to the dismal atmosphere, polluted air, and depletion of fertile land (although his official cause of death is a respiratory illness). The sudden disappearance of nature is evident through the lightning-struck traveler (50) and the numerous trees that threaten to crush the father and son (97).

McCarthy's novel presents a contrasting approach. As an alternative of exploring novel forms of societal organization and cooperation, *The Road* highlights the nuclear family and the bond between a father and son as the fundamental elements of society. Although this can be interpreted as a conservative stance, it

aligns well with the bleak portrayal of nature depicted in the book. The devastated natural environment and ruined human communities are interdependent, leading to a breakdown of the traditional binary and a homogenous representation of the world.

McCarthy's writings feature allusions to cannibalism, prompting questions about the humanity of those who engage in it. These characters occupy a liminal space, much like the violent and depraved Lester Ballard, the bandit trio from *Outer Dark*, and Judge Holden from *Blood Meridian*. *The Road*'s aesthetic reflects this sense of liminality. By using sparse dialogue and omitting speech and thought tags, the narrative creates a distance between the reader and the characters. As Lydia Cooper notes, "the text's visual austerity corresponds to a corresponding absence of subjectivity. The reluctance to acknowledge evaluative perspectives other than that of an aloof, detached narrator is reflected in the absence of commas, ellipses, and parentheses, which often indicate the presence of an evaluative perspective" (3).

The act of cannibalism in *The Road* reduces humans to the status of animals and challenges traditional humanist beliefs, rendering people expendable, as Donna Haraway described the animals raised for human consumption (296). The novel can be interpreted as post human in two distinct ways: the literal disappearance of humans from the world, and the breakdown of the humanistic intellectual system (Callus and Herbrechter 144). This departure from the human "evaluative consciousness" typically found in art produced under humanist aesthetic principles is due to the near-extinction of humans and a narrative that shifts the focus away from the psychological. *The Road* portrays the ruination of both humanity and humanism.

The Road depicts the downfall of both humanity and humanism, a conclusion that mirrors the novel's opening lines: "Perhaps in the end, the world's destruction might reveal how it was made. Mountains and oceans. The ponderous, anti-spectacle of things ceasing to exist. The sweeping, hydroptic, and cold secular void. The emptiness" (*The Road* 274). Wilderness areas that once belonged to nature are

now extinct, and human communities have been mostly wiped out. The relationship between the natural world and humanity is so intertwined that the destruction of one results in the inevitable demise of the other. McCarthy uses the man's scant possessions, such as a few cans of beans and paper towels, to symbolize the final examples of American excess. In contrast to the man's doubts about God throughout much of the novel, God is explicitly and unproblematically referenced in this scene. The passage reads more like a litany than a list, a recitation of God's blessings travel with the man's fervent affirmation.

Given that cannibalism is portrayed as the ultimate evil in the book, it is only natural to associate a plentiful supply of food with God and the ultimate good. In a pre-apocalyptic world, a feast full of high-calorie foods would be highly valued.

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