



UNIVERSITY OF AGDER

## Full Circle

The Apocalyptic Motif in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Robert Browning's  
*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*

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*This master's thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the University of Agder and is therefore approved as a part of this education. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.*

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# Table of Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 SENSE OF HISTORY	6
1.2 THE MYTH OF THE GARDEN	8
1.3 RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS	10
<b>2 THE MONOMYTH</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 THE DEPARTURE	14
2.2 THRESHOLD GUARDIANS	16
2.3 THE BELLY OF THE WHALE	18
2.4 MISSING STAGES	19
2.4.1 SUPERNATURAL AID	21
2.4.2 THE ULTIMATE BOON	22
2.5 THE RETURN	22
2.6 THE GRAIL MYTH	24
2.6.1 THE GRAIL MYTH IN THE ROAD AND CHILDE ROLAND	25
2.6.2 CONTEMPORARY GRAIL	27
<b>3 APOCALYPTIC MOTIFS</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1 THE APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPES	32
3.2 THE BLIND SELF	38
3.3 THE INDUSTRIAL NIGHTMARE	41
3.3.1 APOCALYPTIC WARNING	44
3.3.2 PROGRESS MEASURED BY TECHNOLOGY	47
3.3.3 TRANSFORMATION	48
3.4 FEAR OF GOD	52
3.5 END OF TIME	55
3.5.1 RESIDUES OF HISTORY	57
3.5.2 HISTORICAL IMAGINATION	59
<b>4 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>5 REFERENCES</b>	<b>63</b>

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“Then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifies me through visions.”  
—Job 7:14

## 1 Introduction

The quest for meaning, hope and *raison d'être* has been retold time and again through the turn-stile of myth and fable. Mankind appears to have an inherent universal and timeless obsession with the impending end and their immanent death especially evident in times of crisis. What they often have in common is that they are on the move, progressing towards something. There is a particular tendency to revert back to a *tabula rasa* and wash away whatever current corruption plagues the contemporary times in whatever shape or form. Each successive age reinterprets and reimagines their situated place within a framework of time and history in an attempt to understand their identity both individually and as a community in hope of progress and transformation.

Joseph Campbell in his popular book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, followed his life long passion of exploring the complex and universal myths and symbols that he called “Mankind’s one great story” (Campbell, 2008, p. xi). In his book he suggests a path undertaken by man retold since the beginning of time. Robert Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* (1855) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) are two such paths separated by over a hundred and fifty years—both works inspired by some form of dream or vision. As Browning himself said, “‘Childe Roland’ came upon me as a kind of dream. I had to write it, then and there, and I finished it the same day, I believe. But it was simply that I had to do it. I did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I’m sure I don’t know now. But I am very fond of it” (as cited in, Whiting, 2009, p. 261). And when McCarthy made a guest appearance on the *The Oprah Winfrey Show* he talked about how he was staring out of a hotel window in El Paso one late evening while his son was asleep projecting how he would see the future in about fifty or a hundred years from now. “I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy. And so I wrote those pages and that was the end of it” (www.oprah.com, 2014). In Campbell’s formulation “Dream is personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream” (Campbell, 1988, p. 19). This, as Williams suggests, “presupposes fundamental similarities of plot and image in all myths and romances. All quest tales, according to this Jungian perspective, are symbolic journeys into the

self” (Williams, 1983, p. 33). Both *The Road* and *Childe Roland* draw extensively from an ocean of literary sources, such as John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and have their own child like hero invoking the Jungian Child archetype. The hero, as Campbell suggests, “is symbolical of that divine creative and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and rendered into life” (Campbell, 1988, p. 39).

In McCarthy’s latest screenplay *The Counselor*, the cartel kingpin The Jefe, rehearses lines from *Campos de Castilla* written by Spanish poet Antonio Machado,

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road— Only wakes upon the sea (Machado, 1978, p. 83).

The ambiguous road is the personal journey that must be undertaken by each and every individual. The deliberate omission of name and place in *The Road* and ambiguity in *Childe Roland* emphasizes McCarthy and Browning’s assertion of inward journey. Their message, through storytelling and myth is not to explain a fact, but to enlighten the reader to partake their own critical journey within characterized by personal choice and will questioning the very purpose and goal of life.

In my thesis I will explore the apocalyptic motif that is present in both *The Road* and *Childe Roland* relying on several insightful scholars of Browning and McCarthy’s works such as Grace Hellyer, Paul Sheehan, Dianne C. Luce, Julian Murphet, Mark Steven, Lydia R. Cooper, David V. Erdman, Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow, Lawrence J. Starzyk and Anne Williams among others. Both works have a melancholic and dark tone evident by their landscapes that resemble that of *Revelation*—in addition to their common theme of death, loss and the creation of meaning. The usual function of apocalyptic literature is to reveal something and provide an answer to a particular crisis or loss. This is often prophesized in the future making it immanent and creating a greater sense of urgency. Within this framework I will undertake a comparative and contrastive study of some of the similar themes that they each utilize and discuss how they differ and at times are the same. In the first segment called “The Monomyth,” I discuss Campbell’s monomyth and how it encompasses and enlightens the reading of *The Road* and *Childe Roland* through the

exploration of the quest narrative and how both vary accordingly. In addition, I will discuss a sub genre of the monomyth, which is the symbol of the grail. Both *The Road* and *Childe Roland* adhere to this reading and enlighten the understanding of how the apocalyptic landscape functions in terms of the grail motif as a method to explore solutions for their respective civilization's downfall.

In my second section called the "Apocalyptic Motifs," I will discuss the apocalyptic motifs that account for much of the grotesque darkness, melancholy, and pessimism found in *The Road* and *Childe Roland*. The apocalyptic motifs in *The Road* and *Childe Roland* denote spiritual and moral blindness through the man from *The Road* and Roland from *Childe Roland*. In addition, the revelatory manner function as a warning under religious vocation or cultural criticism of two industrially and technologically progressing nations. Furthermore I discuss the strong Biblical allusions present in both works and their implications. Then in the final segment of this section I will discuss how Browning and McCarthy both utilize history in their attempt to understand their contemporary worlds and justify man's creation of meaning with or without history.

Finally, I will summarize and conclude how Browning and McCarthy share the assertion that to be resolute and act against inertia and cruelties caused by man is the correct action in hopes of saving society and the individual. The hope is to avoid a world, that is in or soon to be, in peril both spiritually and physically from problems such as global warming, or abuse of Scripture and institutional power, which echo mankind's inability to act against intrinsic and manmade fallacies.

## 1.1 Sense of History

The rapid pace of change during Browning's life was significant. However Browning never dealt directly with any of the economic realities of the industrial age or fully acquainted himself with the polemic scientific theories of his time (Erdman, 1957, pp. 418-419). Great Britain grew into a world power, "the empire where the sun never sets," involving issues of industrialization, railroad expansion, gender and slave questions, religious controversy, utilitarianism and the sciences etc. (Browning, Woolford, Karlin, & Phelan, 2010, pp. 979-984). However, the spirit of profitable enterprise is seen in the logic of Browning's theme of success through failure, "The failure to attain makes possible continued striving, in which one finds moral profit, or aesthetic profit, or amorous profit" (Erdman, 1957, p. 418). His Biblical and fictitious

characters are semi-heroic failures of history in their moments of trial. The sin and downfall of the individual lies in stagnant spiritual capital and failure to act for example depicted in *Cleon* and its partner poem *An Epistle containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician*. One can begin to approach Browning's work as Armstrong suggests "by remembering that many of the poems are *about* energy, whether it is the overflow of repressed sexuality in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', the almost raucous religious rapture of 'Saul' or the grey, Checkhovian lassitude of 'Andrea del Sarto', where energy is there by virtue of the experience of its lack" (Isobel, 1993, p. 289). This is especially the case with Roland's profound willingness to face failure and death.

A characteristic of the Victorian Age was to assume supremacy compared to former ages in regards to progress. Browning believed this in a pervasively Victorian way. "Every era in turn impresses its distinctive mark of *progress* on what has gone before" (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 90). However, Browning was unusual in stating that, "impulse to create originates in a feeling of cultural impoverishment. Art, for him, is produced within a curious *negativity*. It emerges from those who look to history and discover their 'lower' status, or deficiency, by comparison with past perfection" (90) such as that of Greek sculptures and Michelangelo's murals etc. (90). History according to Browning was necessary in order to improve and progress. History had to be correctly understood in order to, like art, added to, improved even. However where Browning utilizes the past in order to improve, McCarthy removes history and its cultural legacy away.

In contemporary Western society, greed can be argued to be a resilient characteristic; one of the seven sins still tightly woven into the human condition. McCarthy prophesizes in *The Road* what happens when "progress" reaches its apotheosis and diminishes into dim grayness. The relentless drive in pursuit of the American Dream in the U.S can be linked to vampiric greed of Consumerism. One of the narratives of *The Road* is this aftermath linked to man's intrinsic and seemingly endless quest for more. The ideological impulse of which can be traced back to Victorian Age of Browning and the beginning of industrialism. Browning was not an activist, but he held great respect to some of his contemporaries that were, such as Thomas Carlyle. *Childe Roland* echoes not only the "engine" horrors of hell from *Dante's Inferno*, but also the factory machine with its "wheels" and "rusty teeth of steel" (l. 139-144) (Erdman, 1957).

## 1.2 The Myth of the Garden

The age of the new world superpower that McCarthy was born into evolved out of the former colonial superpower. A new superpower built upon many and often conflicting ideals, evolving out of the myths from Browning's own period. One such ideal was the pastoral which Leo Marx suggests "has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination" (L. Marx, 1967, p. 3). The pastoral ideal and idealization has been *used* in two fundamentally important ways, both in the form of literary (the romanticizing) and in essence political (for purpose of colonizing and alluring people to travel abroad).

The myth of the garden was built upon the foundation of the Biblical Myth of the Garden, but reiterated to explain the advancement of Western settlements and development. Smith discusses how Fredrick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the American History* was the most influential piece of writing about the West produced during the nineteenth century (Smith, 1978, p. 250). Turner's contention is correlated to his former teacher Herbert B. Adams of John Hopkins "who explained American institutions as the outgrowth of English, or rather ancient Teutonic germs planted in the New World" (Smith, 1978, p. 251). The new American democracy according to Smith is born out of the agrarian soil and is the most important factor in shaping American society. Emigrants from Europe flocked to the frontier bringing their own heritage, but through the frontier, would naturally produce novel attitude, institutions and encourage democracy (Smith, 1978, p. 252). Marx claimed that although Shakespeare invested the pastoral hope with unexampled charm and power, in the end he refuses to make of it anything more than a hope. It was not an answer (L. Marx, 1967, p. 71). The more contemporary use of the garden myth, as Smith discusses, shows how it functions as a solution. It provides hope in the promise of freedom, land, abundance, and future. The American hero must make his way out of society like Prospero and the island. It prefigures the Jeffersonian vision of an ideal Virginia, "an imaginary land free both of European oppression and frontier savagery" (L. Marx, 1967, p. 72).

While much of Turner's hypothesis dealt with the economic and progressive ideas of the nation through agrarian development and ideals, the overtones and narrative drew richly from the myth of the garden. The wilderness was not only an



area of free land; it was Nature and it became, “the master symbol” (L. Marx, 1967, p. 143). Smith’s book with its mythic image helped create the Western story. The desert landscapes and cruel wild terrain was for most Americans only interesting in terms of what it can be cultivated into—the idea of progress and potential would come to stay.

The contradiction, according to Marx, arises between savagery and civilization also depicted in *The Tempest*. The hellishly dark island in *The Tempest* is also a place of Eden. Nature is the provider and there exists a fertile abundance of resources for the yeoman who can cultivate it. Gonzalo dreams of the perfect plantation, depicting an ideal rural lifestyle, while everything Prospero does advocates for progress through human effort. His acts of melioration through art echo Francis Bacon who believed in the superiority of today due to the specific innovations in the practical arts (L. Marx, 1967, p. 64). At the same time, the island is also a place of regeneration through colonization and violence. The oppressor Prospero is placed above man within Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being, while Caliban is placed below in close proximity with beasts and the savage. Prospero the Magus sees himself and by the contemporary audience of the time to be *naturally* above Caliban. The narrative justifies this assertion and signifies Prospero’s position and actions morally correct. It is in its rightful place that Prospero enslaves Caliban, but myths are elusive and never arbitrary. As Roland Barthes claims, “it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy” (Barthes, 2009, p. 150).

*Childe Roland* and *The Road* echo *The Tempest* in the sense that they may also be seen as the creation of a new society like the first Puritans to invade America and the making of an English-American identity based on race. The United States is now a nation rich in history having witnessed the disintegration of its ideological other, the USSR, bore witness to the birth of a world characterized by the triumph of global capitalism, and the re-emergence of religious fundamentalism (Gray, 2009, p. 128). However the nation’s population is far from homogenous. The nation has a deep-rooted history, but also stained with violence, which Richard Slotkin explores in his analysis of the western in *Gunfighter Nation*. Slotkin argues that “the historical imagination rewrites the fundamental history of westward national expansion in order to justify that history and turn to it for self-identification in the various guises of myth, legend, history, fiction, and film” (as cited in, Jarrett, 1997, p. 91). One of McCarthy’s prevalent themes is his concern with conquest through primarily unrelenting conquest (Jarrett, 1997, p. 87). As Jarrett suggests:

if the classic western offered a simplified allegorical history of a violent struggle between black and white hats, a hermeneutics for McCarthy's new western is more complicated in that lawlessness is remarkable more for its resemblances to law and authority, not its dissimilarities. Our 'new' westerns deconstruct both law and lawlessness as anarchic projections of the masculine will on the cultural and natural chaos of the West (Jarrett, 1997, p. 87).

*The Road* foretells what happens to the US when its heritage and home of communities spanning from a myriad of ethnicities with their own cultures and histories vanish or when the myths finally run out of gas and self-destruct. The danger of following the myths of religion and the nation is equal to what *The Road* portrays—total disaster and anarchy. Languages are spoken deriving from every corner of the Earth, which begs the question of what the true language and identity of the nation really has. So by erasing all vestiges of the past, McCarthy judges man's intrinsic values and morality in regards to their individualism contra communitarianism. The "melting pot" of the once "world police" is gone, which not only describes the complete collapse of the U.S, but echoes the collapse of the world.

### 1.3 Religious Questions

McCarthy's works share the quality evident in Browning's poetry in regards to committing themselves to religious questions, but with a stronger sense of melancholy. They both share Christian affiliation in terms of theme, but are cut from different cloth. Browning's faith is rooted in Protestantism, but remains elusive through the questionable sanity and character of Roland while McCarthy fronts a more deterministic and secular approach. The quasi-religious tone of *The Road* spins a web of Biblical allusion entwined with secularity questioning the intrinsic goodness of man and the existence of any fundamental moral values.

The intellectual atmosphere during Browning's time cannot be fully appreciated without remembering how significant the ecclesiastical debate was and how religiously involved the Victorian upper class really were. "Religion and the form of one's religious allegiance were matters for public debate" (Hecimovich, 1998, p. 260). England was a growing community of mixed doctrines that each claimed their own truths and universal certainties. Each community "gaining economic,

political, and social status. Victorian religious poetry became an important site for presenting divergent religious perspectives, providing a forum where writers frequently explored the fraught experience of living as a religious ‘other’ in England” (Joseph Bristow, 2000, p. 160).

Browning’s task, as he saw it, was to enlighten his readers and he believed that God gifted poets such as himself. The poet was instrumental in mediating divine truth to humanity (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 102). History was the *interpretative device* for higher forms of knowledge (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 67). The new forms of sciences such as geology, natural history, and evolutionism (challenging biblical history), and the biblical higher criticism (questioning the authenticity of the Gospels) were changing the way people thought the world was shaped and “wrested it from God’s hands and placed it among processes that, on one hand, stretched back into prehistory, before the written or spoken word, and, on the other, pointed to the duplicities of historiography” (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 68). Victorians were “gripped by the *idea* of the power of history not merely by its content, but the representational forms it took (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 68). Peter Allen Dale summarized the tendencies of historicism by how it was not through physics or metaphysics one could best discover the meaning of life, but through *history*. The theistically or idealistically inclined saw history as the revelation of God’s or Absolute Spirit’s providential design for mankind (cited in, J. Bristow, 1991, p. 68). But as Browning knew all too well, history is ultimately a narrative; the purpose of which is to justify one’s religious affiliation and provide evidence for one’s faith. However, history is as illusive as narrative and the controversy of claims and counter-claims pertaining to history are still domains open for debate today. Ultimate certainty as he believed, was impossible to ascertain outside of heaven, which is still generally believed today, although the notion that history holds some form of sublime truth is not as widely accepted as before. Browning would struggle to understand how God could create such a world. It was the divine rationale that placed a gendered ‘mark’ between men and women that baffled him more than anything else. As Bristow suggests, “It was his greatest negativity – the one thing he tried most strenuously of all to ‘read’” (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 158).

McCarthy however does not share the sentimentality towards history as Browning did. In *The Road*, stories and history do not hold any special key to divine knowledge and are deemed fundamentally useless in regards to survival. The universe is indifferent to mankind’s dimming predicament. McCarthy creates a more futuristic

predication than of Browning's typical sermons. The Biblical allusion in *The Road* is evident by the apocalyptic landscape and by the boy who is depicted as the new prophet or "the one" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 277). This usually stems from the religiously reluctant father who is a caricature of the past and is already fading out of existence. However, the novel still functions in a didactic manner. As one critic claims, *The Road* is "The most important environmental book ever written" that "will change the way you see the world" (Monbiot, 2007). McCarthy creates a post-nuclear war scenario toying with extinction in both a literal and historical sense. There are numerable natural earth-shattering disasters that could of caused the world to collapse such as *The Road* portrays, but whatever the reason, McCarthy deems the reason not important enough to name along with almost everything else, shifting the focus back on man. In the end, *The Road* asks if mankind even deserves to live anymore given that it was most likely themselves that brought upon their own demise.

## 2 The Monomyth

Campbell's approach to myth, inspired by Jungian psychology, seeks to understand the potentially universal and intrinsic inner myth prevalent in each and every human. His book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, takes into consideration the myths of the world and concludes with a limited number of responses to the ongoing riddle of life. Armed in the end with an archetype of all human myth, his psychological approach is then put up against the spiritual leaders such as Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Law-tse, and the "Old Man" of the Australian tribes. He describes them as spontaneous productions of the psyche and that each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source (Campbell, 1988, p. 4). Campbell appears to agree with Browning in regards to how they acknowledge the possibility and necessity of "reading" their way towards understanding, while McCarthy remains indifferent to man's overall predicament. The cause of many evils, as can be read in *The Road* and *Childe Roland*, is mythology, which according to Campbell is "psychology misread as biography; history, and cosmology. The modern psychologist can translate it back to its proper denotations and thus rescue for the contemporary world a rich and eloquent document of the profoundest depths of human character" (Campbell, 1988, p. 256).

*The Road* then is a prediction of mythology taken too far. It can be seen as McCarthy's attempt to rescue the contemporary world from the dangers of their own myths. McCarthy rejects the monomyth and myths such as the American Dream and the garden myth by distorting and portraying them in a nightmarish manner. The intentional omission of proper nouns signify that the heroes are "everymen," not "supermen," and what happens when one strays from the quest motif's true purpose: inward journey. According to Campbell, personal modified symbolic figures that appear in nightmare or madness are a result of the tormented individual, "both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind" (Campbell, 1988, p. 19). In this sense, the dreams and visions of McCarthy and Browning depict both their individual as well as their societal torments.

*Childe Roland* also deviates from the monomyth, but to a different effect. Roland can be seen as victorious seeing as he conquers his blighted environment. The prime function of myth has always been “to carry the spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back” (Campbell, 1988, p. 11). The protagonists’ from *Childe Roland* and *The Road* are layman variants moved by this mythical and spiritual notion and both fall under the monomyth schemata. They are all preoccupied with death and despair and seem to be living in worlds on the brink of extinction. They must traverse gray, melancholy planes of both physical and psychological anxieties, but for what purpose? The ominously named Dark Tower in *Childe Roland* suggests death and the man from *The Road* is already from an early onset coughing up blood (McCarthy, 2007, p. 30). Roland tells us he has been ‘searching all [his] life to find it’; ‘all agree’ that it rests beyond the “dusty thoroughfare” at the end of an ‘ominous track’. It is unknown to the Childe and yet immediately recognizable—ultimately he finds himself in a valley and knows ‘this was the place!’” (Williams, 1983, pp. 31-32). As outlined by Campbell, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell, 1988, p. 30). However the heroes of these two stories do not come back.

## 2.1 The Departure

Since “Childe” stands for a young man preparing for knighthood, the suggestive pun on “child” as, “innocent and inexperienced resonates with the conventional associations of the archetypical journey as a rite of initiation” (Williams, 1983, p. 28). However upon closer inspection, the poem reveals a formidable amount of contrasts. Roland is no young innocent child, but in fact a long-tried and weary man, who does not make it home from his respective journey. In its perfection, as Williams suggests, “the heroic journey is circular; here we see only an arc, a portion of the journey toward the goal” and as Campbell claims, “If one or another portion of the basic elements of the archetypical pattern is omitted from a given fairy tale, legend, ritual, or myth, it is bound to be somehow or other—and the omission itself can

*speak volumes for the history or pathology of the example*” (Campbell, 1988, p. 38;emphasis williams).

The boy from *The Road* is a child and as such relate to the common archetypal figure of the “child” by how they function to “foreshadow or accompany forward movement and progression through creative regression leading to symbolic death and renewal in the psyche” (as cited in, Sugg, 1992, pp. 184-185). The boy from *The Road* becomes more specifically the “divine child” or, as I will discuss later, the “chalice”—and when Ely saw the boy, he thought that he had died, “I didn’t know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn’t know that would happen” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 183). The appearance of a child in a dream may even signify a turning point in one’s life or analysis—similar to the boy from *The Road*, a child may represent the good prognosis and represents a new vita, growth, fertility, potential, creativity and new direction (Sugg, 1992, p. 185). However, the child image may also be infernal, monstrous, and sadistic (Sugg, 1992, p. 185). Despite the purity of the boy from *The Road*, McCarthy depicts both polarities of society when envisaging the charred infant (McCarthy, 2007, p. 212). There is not much hope and futurity for humanity when they eat their own infants, which functions as a stark reminder of how the moral scales of the world have tipped more negatively than positively. Nonetheless, both *The Road* and *Childe Roland* conform to a familiar structure in regards to the composite picture of Campbell’s traditional hero’s quest.

Campbell’s names for the three stages the hero passes through are “Crossing the First Threshold”, “The Belly of the Whale”, and “The Road of Trials”. As Williams suggests in regards to *Childe Roland* “The first seven stanzas describe Roland’s entrance into the land of the unknown where adventure and discovery are possible” (Williams, 1983, p. 29). In *The Road*, their departure has also already begun. The novel begins after waking from another dream “he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 1)—the world already “dimming away” (1). They are already in threshold of the typical “dark forest” (Campbell, 1988, p. 51) with no guardian to be seen.

## 2.2 Threshold Guardians

The usual threshold guardian encountered in the quest narrative is sometimes perceived by the world as dark loathly, or terrifying and evil, but also as a beast, as in a fairy tale, or representing the repressed instinctual fecundity within ourselves (Campbell, 1988, p. 53). The “hoary cripple” from *Childe Roland* and Ely from *The Road*, are variant examples of this threshold guardian but also allude to Campbell’s “Old wise man” whose general task is to:

assist the hero through the trials and terrors of the weird adventure. He is the one who appears and points to the magic shining sword that will kill the dragon-terror, tells of the waiting bride and the castle of many treasures, applies healing balm to the almost fatal wounds, and finally dismisses the conqueror, back into the world of normal life, following the great adventure into the enchanting night (Campbell, 1988, pp. 9-10).

However, Ely from *The Road* and the cripple from *Childe Roland* are disdainful old men that do not aid the protagonists in either works and are strongly resented by both parties. Roland’s ambivalent characteristics appear in his peculiar dealings with the cripple. He assumes that the cripple will write his epitaph “in the dusty thoroughfare” (l. 11-12) if he turns aside, yet despite his depiction of the cripple as “hateful” (l. 44), lying and having a “malicious eye,” (l. 2) he nonetheless follows cripple’s advice. Roland’s physical and psychological behavior creates disequilibrium from the onset of the poem and to the steadfast norm of the hero crossing the threshold (Williams, 1983, p. 35). As Orr summarized, some discrepancies emerge after looking beneath the surface of the poem. For example that the ominous Tower is much closer than Roland had first thought. In addition, the sinister looking old cripple, who Roland perceives as deceitful, was in fact telling the truth about the Tower’s whereabouts all along. Half of the horrors experienced by Roland are either a figment of his imagination or some unknown effect caused by his present apocalyptic environment (Orr, 1896, pp. 273-274)

Intriguingly, madness is also brought out in the man from *The Road*. When the man and the boy encounter the Ely, Ely is far from a pleasant man to behold with his “filthy beard” and “scrawny claws” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 174). He lives like an animal



(McCarthy, 2007, p. 183) and is treated like one. All the boy wants to do is feed him and bring him “home”.

The boy turned and looked at him.

I know what the question is, the man said.

The answer is

no.

What’s the question? Can we keep him.

We cant.

I know.

You know (McCarthy, 2007, p. 174).

Yet Ely is also a Buddha-like figure (McCarthy, 2007, p. 179), which Campbell describes as “this godlike being who is a pattern of the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance” (Campbell, 1988, p. 151). As Ely proclaims “People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn’t believe in that. Tomorrow wasn’t getting ready for them. It didn’t even know they were there” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 179). Ely is past everything and in a sense is everything and nothing. He has accepted nature’s indifference and man’s self-induced fate. Ely alludes to Nirvana—“wish you’d never been born” (180); the negation of Islam, “There is but one God and we are his prophets (180); and the name itself is taken straight out of the Bible (Eli). Hesitantly contemplating any further contact with Ely, the man curses and “looked down at the old man. Perhaps he’d turn into a God and they to trees” (173). But there will be no rescue from without. They will not become trees<sup>1</sup>. Despite the man’s lack of empathy towards Ely, Ely does teach him something. Through their discourse of God, charity and nature’s indifference, Ely reminds the man that they are not alone (181), but their conversation is another example of two vanishing ghosts walking the same path that only the boy can walk out of.

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<sup>1</sup> As Campbell suggests, “the most important single moment in Oriental mythology, a counterpart of the Crucifixion of the West. The Buddha beneath the Tree of enlightenment (The Bo Tree) and Christ on Holy Rood (The Tree of Redemption) are analogues figures, incorporating an archetypal World Savior, World Tree motif, which is on immemorial antiquity” enlightenment (The Bo Tree) and Christ on Holy Rood (The

### 2.3 The Belly of the Whale

In the next segment of Campbell's paradigm the hero enters the "The Belly of the Whale". This popular motif emphasizes the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. As Campbell suggests, "The hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshiper into a temple—where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely dust and ashes unless immortal" (Campbell, 1988, p. 91). This corresponds to when Roland becomes lost:

after a pace or two,  
Than pausing to throw back backward a last view  
O'er the safe road, 't was gone: grey plain all around! (l. 50-52)

Now that Roland is all alone, Browning deviates from the traditional versions of the monomyth. Roland does not meet an Ogre or dragon, but must overcome his own demons: demons of "fear, revulsion, loneliness, disgust, and hatred. His trials are psychological<sup>2</sup>" (Williams, 1983, p. 29). Roland's obstacles are not as physically threatening as the predicament found in *The Road*. However as evil and threatening the hoary cripple and landscape seems, it is only through Roland's perspective that the reader can judge and make any sort of assertion. It mirrors the historicism of Browning. Roland's questionable character forces the readers to distance themselves and retreat from making any factual decision with haste.

In *The Road*, the man is left with a heavier burden. His obstacles are neither ogres nor dragons, but something equally horrible and polymorphous. The zombie-like marching armies of the waste land are not some form of mythical beast, but human. The fact that it is man against man brings the horror and blight of the whole situation even closer to home. There is a complete loss of humanity and moral standard. The groups of people presented in *The Road* are small family units, gangs or cults that commit incomprehensible cruel tendencies or lost vagabond drifters of the blasted terrain. McCarthy paints a more morbid and vivid picture of what humans are actually capable of. In addition, the man and the boy must face physical hardships

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<sup>2</sup> Klingten claims that Roland's struggles is largely against himself rather than any outside challenges, and the ultimate victory lies in his conquest of his human frailty (Kintgen, 1966, p. 257).

brought upon by Nature's wrath. There is little relief provided by the nuclear winter biosphere of the post-apocalyptic landscape.

The father from *The Road* must also overcome internal demons similar to Roland. He is in a continuous and strenuous battle against his own physical and mental state. "He thought that he was getting stupid and that his head wasn't working right. Concentrate, he said. You have to think" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 103) and shortly after, "He was going to cough. He put his whole mind to holding it back" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 120). It becomes, "a mantra for the man to remind himself of the need to maintain a state of concentration; to guard against involuntary physical and psychological impulses such as his hurtful memories and dreams of the past" (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 48). The fact that the father feels obliged to remain in a constant state of alertness should not come as a surprise given his bleak predicament, but the reluctance of the father to share his heritage and past with his son results in a break in continuity. Their life on the road is by no means a pleasant one. The repetition of every minuscule detail to ensure survival that the father conceives draws nearer and nearer to a compulsive obsession that borders on insanity and questions how much can be taken away from human existence for it still to qualify as 'life'? (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 91)

The result of the father's self-annihilation is linked to how critics have read *The Road* with an imposing critical agenda. The father and his past that he abhors suggest an embodiment of America's several haunting ghosts, which must shrink into oblivion in order for any chance of renewal. He had thing feeling before, "beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion.... The sacred idiom short of its referents and so of its reality (McCarthy, 2007, p. 93).

## 2.4 Missing stages

In *Childe Roland*, two vital stages of the myth are missing from the monomyth. The poem begins at the threshold with the cripple and there does not seem to be any typical "Call to Adventure," which Campbell suggests "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown" (Campbell, 1988, p. 58). Roland is at the threshold from the beginning and already in contact with the conventional "threshold guardian". All such encounters Williams suggests are "seemingly random

and accidental, and Roland is understandably suspicious of the ‘hoary cripple’ (l. 2) with ‘skull-like laugh’ (l. 10) who, for the reader, suggests the traditional iconography of death as a skeleton” (Williams, 1983, p. 29). Roland reveals that the quest for the Tower has been something sought after all of his life: some form of intrinsic necessity that has no special devotion or choice. The search for the Dark Tower, “is an irksome duty that defiles all who engage in it. It is ominous and unavoidable, and he must undertake it” (Williams, 1983, p. 29). Even when Roland makes a clear statement and seems highly motivated, his passivity in regard to the whole process is curious:

Thus, I had so long suffered in this quest,  
    Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ  
    So many times among “The Band” –to wit,

The knights who to the Dark Tower’s search addressed  
Their steps—that just to fail as they, seemed best,  
    And all the doubt was now—should I be fit (l. 37-42)

Roland’s resolve is frequently attributed to habit, conformity, or inertia and as Williams continues “Even the name of these seekers, ‘The Band’, perhaps hints at the constriction as well as comradeship or loyalty” (Williams, 1983, p. 30). Roland is no doubt in some form of unease state pertaining to an array of root causes. The restrictive strings of habit, conformity and society echo the many double standards of the Victorian period.

The man and the boy’s “call to adventure” in *The Road* is a forced one. The supposedly safe haven or family sanctuary from which they have already departed is nothing but a resting place for a suicidal wife and mother. It was a place where they could not survive another winter. The driving motive for the man and the boy remains generally unanswered, but left ambiguously open in hope of a better life as they struggle towards the ocean.

### 2.4.1 Supernatural Aid

The next segment that is called for by Campbell's paradigm is "Supernatural Aid". As Campbell discusses, the heroes that have not refused the call upon their first encounter during their hero-journey "encounter a form of protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell, 1988, p. 69). Roland and the man receive no amulets or magical weapons in order to aid them along their journey. Roland's seeks aid through his memories, but in turn proves to be quite futile:

I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart.

As a man calls for wine before he fights,

I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,

Ere fitly I could hope to play my part (l. 85-88).

Roland recognizes the value of history and its futility. The only thing that can aid him now is to live in the present moment. "Better this present than a past like that; / Back therefore to my darkening path again" (l. 103-104). He is a lost hermit and ushered, by some unknown force, forward. He compares himself to a lost animal (l.173-174), and when the Dark Tower suddenly appears, he feels trapped (Williams, 1983, p. 30).

The man's memories from *The Road* function in a similar fashion. They are painful reminders of the relentless loss of his vanished world. He recognizes less and less, the sun (McCarthy, 2007, p. 189), the sea (230), and even his own son becomes alienated to him (137,163). He is in constant fear of his past and dreams. The irretrievable loss of beauty and goodness would make him sob uncontrollably (137). The father ascribes that "the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death" (17). Adhering to his own creed he unburdens himself of his photo of his lost wife by the roadside (53). However, as he mentions earlier, there is no waking from daydreams and she was always on his mind, "He could remember everything of her save her scent" (17-18). The past becomes something tainted with a strong feeling of guilt remorse. The reader is left blank in regards to how it all came to be and is left to contemplate it for him or herself. The

man is also “trapped” like Roland, entrapped by his own past whereas death seems to be their only escape.

#### 2.4.2 The Ultimate Boon

The next step pertaining Campbell’s monomyth would be the announcement of the “The Ultimate Boon,” revelation and enlightenment. As Campbell writes:

The boon bestowed on the worshiper is always scaled to his stature and to the nature of his dominant desire: the boon is simply a symbol of life energy stepped down to the requirements of a certain specific case. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that, whereas the hero who has won the favor of the god may beg for the boon of perfect illumination, what he generally seeks are longer years to live, weapons with which to slay his neighbor, or the health of his child (Campbell, 1988, p. 189).

The lack of illumination is one of the fundamental problems pertaining to both Roland and the man. The chief fault of this lack of illumination and spiritual development is civilization. The only concern of the man from *The Road* is the protection of his child from his cannibal neighbors. His worldly desires win compared to Roland who disregards everything except his ultimate goal of reaching the Tower and enlightenment through death. The boy from *The Road* is the only one of the three protagonists that is not burdened by spiritual and perceptive blindness and who actually survives. He is always illuminated and pure while his father and Roland from *Childe Roland* bear the scars from their respective societies. However, Roland and the man do not return to share whatever they have learned; if in fact anything was learned at all. In addition, the boy’s survival is far from any guarantee of a promising future for mankind. In retrospect, no certain answer or solution to their predicament is provided. And the only hope created is dismal and bleak.

#### 2.5 The Return

The most decisive change of trajectory in *The Road* and *Childe Roland* is no doubt “The Return,” which is the last chapter in Campbell’s diagram. This is the segment when the hero, upon completing his quest, returns to society with the wisdom

and knowledge (boon) in order to renew the community, nation and planet(s) (Campbell, 1988, p. 193). Seeing as Roland from *Childe Roland* and the man from *The Road* die, they have no boon to bestow and fail to return to their respective societies or whatever is left. However the boy does survive, although his fate remains fundamentally uncertain and nonetheless not very hopeful. The heroes' quest, due to the reader's finite perspective, resemble that of questers such as Buddha or other certain questers whose final enlightenment remain ineffable (Williams, 1983, p. 31). For the archetypal journey to be complete it should be circular, yet we are left with an arc, which is only a portion of the goal. Whatever the hero learns, it is through journey and persistence in their quest or goal creating meaning as they go. In the same way the boy from *The Road* makes sure to remind his frail 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 (McCarthy, 2007, p. 170).

There are several unanswered questions and open ended elements that may be taken away, altered, replaced and recontextualised, but the human condition has not. *The Road* and *Childe Roland* are examples of the prevailing myths and intrinsic human condition for meaning and purpose that have and keep evolving—metamorphic in character and as stubborn and resilient as the protagonist that have to endure the physical and mental aftermath. However the reader is not provided with any certainty or truth, only hinting to the journey. In the end, the reader is left with to

reflect on the value and legitimacy of their own personal journeys and the tragedies caused by upon by myth and man.

## 2.6 The Grail Myth

The journey is evident enough, but in order to explain the root cause of the apocalyptic motif it helps to look at a more specific instance of the monomyth, which is the grail myth. This also helps to understand the apocalyptic warning evident in both *The Road* and *Childe Roland*. The common grail motifs can be split up into two general categories according to Cooper: “chivalric romances about King Arthur’s knights encountering the grail and histories of the grail from the time of Christ to its removal to Britain” (Cooper, 2011, p. 219). The most influential in terms of those stories’ impact upon subsequent literature is the former. However there is no consistent “Grail story,” but Juliette Wood describes the basic story outline as such:

A mysterious vessel or object which sustains life and / or provides sustenance is guarded in a castle which is difficult to find. The owner of the castle is either lame or sick and often (but not always) the surrounding land is barren. The owner can only be restored if a knight finds the castle and, after seeing a mysterious procession, asks a certain question. If he fails in this task, everything will remain as before and the search must begin again. After wanderings and adventures (many of which relate to events which the young hero fails to understand the first time), the knight returns to the castle and asks the question which cures the king and restores the land. The hero knight succeeds the wound king (usually called the Fisher King) as guardian of the castle and its contents (Wood, 2000, p. 170).

The themes of the grail narrative that resonate through modern and postmodern versions of the tale are the dying king and his kingdom says Cooper, which is infected by the root cause of his wounding—“The cause of the wounding in particular becomes paramount, and the cause is almost inevitably linked to human corruption” (Cooper, 2011, pp. 219-220). The grail is a metaphor for the solution and is capable of healing a world in need of spiritual or moral renewal. The world of *Childe Roland* and *The Road* are two such worlds.



The application of the narrative is never perfect, but like the monomyth presented by Campbell:

The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or more of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the *Odyssey*). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes (Campbell, 1988, p. 246).

Many critics have noted that, “despite historically rooted contexts and accuracy of detail, McCarthy’s earlier novels are characteristically drenched in mythological motif and allegorical sensibility, often reflecting in particular a debt to traditional European tropes, texts and narrative modes” (Cooper, 2011, pp. 220-221). Russel M. Hillier, for example demonstrates how *Child of God* is a “subversive parody” of *Pilgrim’s Progress* (as cited in, Cooper, 2011, p. 221) and Jay Ellis traces the heritage of the chivalric romance in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, from the chivalric codes to the hierarchical social ordering of “knights” and “squires” to say nothing of the thematic obsession with concepts such as honor and revenge (as cited in, Cooper, 2011, p. 221). *Childe Roland*, as mentioned earlier, shares some of the literary heritage and aspirations of *The Road*. The question at hand becomes not that grail motifs figure so prominently in *The Road* and *Childe Roland*, but rather why McCarthy and Browning turn to grail mythology at all.

### 2.6.1 The Grail myth in *The Road* and *Childe Roland*

*The Road* is a novel where one has to work in order to excavate some positive morsels of encouragement for the future and mankind. Interpretations of the text depend on what you believe caused the world to collapse. As Cooper suggests “the excess of carnage and apocalyptic horror in its pages may stretch the limits of credulity” (Cooper, 2011, p. 218). This leads to one critic’s assertion that that seeing as the novel is so sublimely damaged, it must have a “supernatural cause,” and concludes therefore that *The Road* is a retelling of the Book of Revelation (Grindley, 2008, p. 12). This may also be said of *Childe Roland* given its strong Biblical influences such as the “death-by-water” motif and the baptismal imagery that Leslie

M. Thompson points out in regard to the river that Roland encounters, which were “prominent in Christian belief and in Victorian literature” (Thompson, 1967, p. 349). But as Cooper suggests, the fantastic elements in *The Road*, however, are not supernatural allegory, but mythological motif (Cooper, 2011, p. 219). The working title for the novel in its early draft was *The Grail*<sup>3</sup>, a title that illustrates the narrative arc in which a dying father embarks on a quest to preserve his son, whom he imagines as a “Golden chalice, good to house a God” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 78) “the symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted by some catastrophic disease” (Cooper, 2011, p. 219).

Roland’s journey ends in defeat and, as most critics point out, death. However his defeat can be seen as a failure or as a victory, even both. Roland is a variation of the monomyth and as such he remains an Everyman, not superman, not Parsifal, as Williams suggests, to come to revive the wasteland (Williams, 1983, p. 43). This is a fundamentally divergent point between *Childe Roland* and *The Road*. Roland is not concerned with his waste land. His journey is primarily spiritual and has a stern crusader-like determination in regards to his life after death. Roland does not search for meaning; he has already created meaning out the vast desolated landscape. It is the “Last Judgment’s fires” (l. 65) that can cleanse the fictive world, not Roland. Roland does not come back to share his boon like Lazarus, his perennial conflict is that of man’s universal struggle between spirit and body (mind and nature). Roland knows something that the reader does not and the reader is baffled by his quest and resolve. But whatever it is that is on the other side or the unanswerable question of meaning remains unsayable through language or experience depicted by the poem’s endless possibilities.

*The Road* on the other hand is a depiction of the human need to create meaning where there is none and the utter uncertainty that ensues. John Marino examined several films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to Terry Gilliam’s *The Fisher King* (1991) as evidence of the innumerable recurrences of “transformation” of the grail metaphor for political concerns (as cited in, Cooper, 2011, p. 220). These symbols “bring meaning to a human experience often thought to be meaningless” in a world characterized by “destruction on a global scale, widespread social injustice, and

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<sup>3</sup> All information from McCarthy’s papers is attributable to The Cormac McCarthy Papers, part of the Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Alkek Library, Texas State University-San Marcos. The earliest sketches for *The Road* appear as loose-lead sheets with a penciled, underlined heading “The Grail” (91.86.1) (Cooper, 2011, p. 235).

loss of faith in the traditional absolutes that explained reality” (Marino, 2004, pp. 115-116).

### 2.6.2 Contemporary Grail

Both *Childe Roland* and *The Road* take inspiration from the waste land theme depicting the contest between fertility and sterility where the fertility is symbolized by the grail. Without the grail, in one form or another, the sterile landscapes symbolizing the state of society will not be restored or there will be no salvation. Eliot applied the Waste Land and Fisher King motifs to an apocalyptic rendering of London in order to address social and ethical concerns. In the same fashion, McCarthy adapts them to the U.S and Browning to Great Britain, yet they remain profoundly universal and not limited to Browning and McCarthy’s respective time and nation.

The boy from *The Road* is a variant of Perceval while simultaneously functioning as the grail. The father is the dying Fisher King and their arduous journey in search of the “right question,” which is key for any chance of potential healing (Cooper, 2011, p. 222). As Cooper suggests, early grail narratives depict a common tendency for the grail bearer to be pure and this is an essential component of the grail’s ability to return to mankind (Cooper, 2011, p. 223). The boy is constantly associated with the light and described as a glowing tabernacle (McCarthy, 2007, p. 293): the tent that housed the presence of God in ancient Israel (Cooper, 2011, p. 224). He is the vessel that functions as house for the divine light or the answer to cure the corrupted world—the “golden chalice, good to house a god” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 78).

The most recent cause for fear of impending doom in the United States is no doubt the “War on Terror” after the attacks of 9/11. Luce even claims that *The Road* “had its genesis in a very specific moment” (Luce, 2008, p. 5) alluding to the specific moment that McCarthy had his apocalyptic vision “perhaps not long after September 11, 2001” (Luce, 2008, p. 5). The father from *The Road* even muses the idea of watching the world burn: “The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities...more fragile than he would have thought” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 93). The apocalyptic has become so mainstream in contemporary U.S society that the fixation

and demand has even resulted in a reality series<sup>4</sup> satirizing some of the nation's population. The wife from *The Road* even points out how their world is not just ruined; it is cinematically destroyed: "We're the walking dead in a horror film" (57), she says. Her reference links American pulp apocalyptic films to the futuristic world of *The Road* with the fears and anxieties of today (Cooper, 2011, p. 222).

If *The Road* can be interpreted in terms of McCarthy's personal visions and anxieties characterizing the contemporary West, *Childe Roland* does the same in regards to Browning and the Victorian period. As Williams suggests, "Roland's defiance is Byronic, Faustian: the conquest of spirit over circumstance" (Williams, 1983, p. 42). These circumstances reflect the accreting polemics towards religion such as High Criticism and the religious doubt and antagonism that the new sciences ensued. In addition as Thompson suggests, Browning did have his age of religious doubt however his courtship with Elizabeth Barrett helped restore many of his basic beliefs (Thompson, 1967, p. 434), however as the man from *The Road* tells his son:

Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that.

You forget some things, don't you?

Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget (McCarthy, 2007, p. 11).

Roland from *Childe Roland* and the man from *The Road* exhibit a maddening tendency as I discussed earlier. They are trapped by something, which further exaggerates their maddening human desire. This twisted habit derives either out of the human desire and fallacy or as a result of their direct environment. In Browning's poem *Cleon*, Protus shares Cleon's agony, Protus commands: "Let progress end at once" (l. 222) and argues, "Most progress is most failure" (l. 272). Browning highlights again the importance of striving in the face of failure, like Roland's relentless determination despite "Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ / So many time among "The Band" —to wit" (l. 38-39). As Bristow suggests, the desire to reach towards a level of critical consciousness – how "Man's spirit might grow conscious of man's life" (l. 220) – undermines the despot's authority; and yet his inquiring mind

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<sup>4</sup> *Doomsday Preppers* is a reality show depicting Americans that believe the nation and or the world will collapse within their lifetime for one reason or another. For this reason they build shelters, "prepare" and arm themselves to be ready for such an event such as *The Road* envisions.

compels him to search for a solution to his infernal desire. Cleon makes his peroration by stating that humanity has raised itself about “the brute’s head” (l. 230) and “perish there” (l. 236). In the end, “Protus’ magnificent monument ironically transforms into a symbol of wasted human resources. It represents one despairing phase of human endeavor that should never be returned to” (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 114). This dictates back to Browning’s understanding of art and history as constantly transformative and progressive similar to that of Greek culture, it had to be superseded. In a disputation “‘parleyings,’ ‘With Gerard de Lairesse’ (1887), Browning points out why Ancient Greece was the modern world in its infancy:”

Earth’s young significance is all to learn:  
The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn  
Where who seeks fire finds ashes. Ghost, forsooth!  
What was the best Greece babbled of as truth?  
(as cited in, J. Bristow, 1991, p. 114)

Similarly, Cleon envisions himself dead in his urn and dead is exactly where Roland from *Childe Roland* and the man from *The Road* end up. From this angle the sins, fallacies and wasted human resources of the contemporary societies are poured into the scapegoat protagonists and their respective landscapes. Browning’s only healing balm of hope resides in the individual’s spiritual journey to conquer the physical world’s evil circumstances by reading history through a Christian lens. McCarthy however does not seem to share the need for a Christian interpretation, but if there is to be any survival of man it will be through some form of inherent quality that must be passed down. This inheritance is revealed as “fire” (ambiguous for love, civility, and ethics) between the father and son and without it results in death—as the wife had said, “You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot. Death is not a lover. Oh yes he is” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 58).

The purpose of the grail narratives or heroic quests as discussed previously is to acquire some sort of solution or healing balm to cure or restore the diseased land and restore the kingdom. *The Road* and *Childe Roland* chase tentative answers through the grail motif of the “right question”. Loomis claims that the Fisher King motif in grail narratives accentuates the “right question” motif. Perceval fails his first

quest due to his inability to ask the right question of the dying kind in the castle. As Cooper suggests, “The cryptic questions seem initially to have little to do with the central questions of the grail — questions of inheritance and moral purity — but Joseph Campbell argues that in fact the ritualized questions explicate those very qualities” (as cited in, Cooper, 2011, p. 230). The fundamental crisis of the grail story resides in the question proposed by Campbell, “How is the Waste Land going to be cured?” And his answer is “by the spontaneous act of a noble heart, whose impulse is not of ego but of love — and love in the sense not of sexual love, but of compassion” (Campbell, 1990, pp. 254-255).

If there is to be any such love in *The Road*, it is likely to be found between the man and the boy who also functions as the grail. He is also the Romantic depiction of Perceval and similar to Roland’s romantic and chivalric heritage, the boy from *The Road* is also feral like the figure of Perceval. He is born after civilization, by chance, not in the wild, yet in the forest nonetheless—completely unfamiliar with the basic manners and appropriate societal behavior of the vanished age of the father. Shopping, sitting at a table and even walking up stairs is a mystery to the boy. When the man and the boy approach a house (McCarthy, 2007, p. 218), the boy hesitates fearing that someone may be inside. He asks several times if they can “wait” before entering the house; he balks at going upstairs (219, 225); and when the boy is juxtaposed with the relic remains of the past standing under the glass chandelier in the palatial dining room, the man thinks he looks like a “troll come in from the night” (222). Yet he is drawn to the heroes of the stories foretold by his father of courage and justice (42), drawn as Cooper says, toward shining examples of chivalry (Cooper, 2011, p. 222).

In the end, the boy from *The Road* and Roland from *Childe Roland* are two variants of the questing and coming “child” that through the cycles of time and history have a perennial seemingly unsolvable task of saving their respective societies and spiritual selves’. However, Browning’s variation is an apocalyptic nightmare of the familiar grail and quest allegories. He does not come back to restore his society. In fact his reluctance to do so or his pride would suggest failure. It is only if the reader believes that Roland’s true and selfless love lies in God that his death and quest is a success. But even in this success, Browning uses the quest narrative for more of a dramatic effect than to reveal any true answer. Certainty in the physical world, as Browning believes, is impossible. Nonetheless, the vices and cruelties of man reveal

themselves through Browning's dream that inspired his poem and can be read as an expenditure of both individual and collective psychic turbulence. Similarly, *The Road* leaves the reader to second-guess what the real cause of the apocalyptic peril—it becomes similar to when suddenly awakening from a nightmare, the reader must be enlightened and shaken by the horrors of what their present actuality might bring. The real truth of the story is that there is no magic grail to solve the world's problem, but the sin is to not try or do anything at all.

### 3 Apocalyptic Motifs

#### 3.1 The apocalyptic Landscapes

In *The Road*, everything is torched bare and relentlessly gray. The hostile and alien, decaying landscape is slowly swallowing up the ruined cities and towns under a shroud of ash. The once familiar land is juxtaposed with littered corpses, “sagging hands of wire” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 6), “dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water” (12), “cauterized terrain” (13), “the standing dead trees” (71), and ribbed steel stairs of escalators (83). The viscerally realistic, either living or dead landscape, is constantly personified reflecting a gutted and ransacked gray world with brief illuminations of something that once was which stings like the flash of knives from the sun in a deep cave (42). Similar to that of *Childe Roland*, the landscape echoes the Revelation implying the end, the on-going process or the aftermath of some horrible calamity.

The gray is ominous, yet represents more than death and waste. It is also “a color that marks eventuation or transformation—it is a color that things become, as when we say the sky becomes gray” (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 13). Even under the most hazardous circumstances, hope may be found. Similar to the burnt black-gray ashes of a burned up phoenix, rebirth and renewal is possible, but not after it has perished can something spring up from the ashes. Although McCarthy is by no means generous in his depiction of man’s ultimate fate. As Cooper points out in regards to McCarthy’s *Sunset Limited*, White claims that “if that pain [of human existence] were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash (127)” (as cited in, Cooper, 2011, p. 225). *The Road* “takes White’s proclamation and transforms into an image of the future in which all the avarice and atrocity of which human race is capable is being expended in a rage now reaching its inevitable conclusion” (Cooper, 2011, pp. 225-226). McCarthy seems to invoke the luminous ashen-gray in a dimming and winding down manner, not the revitalizing and fertile ashes of the phoenix—nothing grows, there is no fodder to feed the non-existent cattle (McCarthy, 2007, p. 127). In addition the boy dreams about a penguin toy, “the winder wasn’t turning” (37) foreshadowing their inevitable demise.



The utter lack of fertility of the landscapes in *The Road* and *Childe Roland* make the survival of the protagonists appear almost miraculous. It functions as a startling example to the reader as to the frailty between nature and the survival of man. The father from *The Road* is constantly assessing the meaninglessness of their existence and strives to find hope—the primary hope being the ocean, but the man will take whatever hope he can. In two instances the man stumbles upon seeds, the very embodiment of rebirth and new beginnings. The first instance is when the man is rummaging through a barn after methodically searching each room in blind faith of finding some tools for harvesting the seeds from the haybales, “There was yet a lingering odor of cows in the barn and he stood there thinking about cows and he realized they were extinct. Was that true? There could be a sow somewhere being fed and cared for. Could there? Fed what? Saved for what?” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 127). The second instance is upon scavenging a garden shed where the man finds packets of begonia seeds, “Morning glory. He stuck them in his pocket. For what?” (140). The man is constantly at odds with himself—in doubt, hope and religious conviction. Even armed with seeds to sow a new future in the agricultural soil of their new frontier, the post-apocalyptic land, like the garden the man comes across, is barren and dead like his dreams and vestiges of a diminishing age that has failed.

Despite the cruelties and harsh realities of Nature, the forest still functions as a traditional place of safe haven deriving out of the pastoral ideal, albeit in a reduced form. In *The Road*, Nature, even under the direst circumstances, is represented through the blackened trees and is still the main source of sustainability for the man and the boy as well as providing protection from the elements. As Sheehan suggests “If McCarthy uses *The Road* to invoke American Capitalism, his synecdoche for nature is trees” (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 98). Trees are everywhere in the book, both past and present under a manifold guises. Trees indicate life and bear fruit, however the hard and tasteless apples discovered at the decaying orchard, by pure luck, “is a bitter retort to the ur-apple, the fruit of knowledge that gets Adam and Eve cast out of Eden” (98). It is another example of a lost Eden and broken image of paradise linking *The Road* to McCarthy’s earlier work. “His first novels return again and again to the loss of American myth of virtue and innocence—a myth derived from the “Puritan vision of a sanctified national mission in an Edenic paradise” (98).

All of these instances of *luck* make the boy appear as the new world *Ragged Dick* that Horatio Alger created inspired by popular Renaissance and seventeenth

century ballads and chapbooks such as *The Honour of a London Prentice* and *Sir Richard Whittington's Advancement*. Such ballads, like the boy from *The Road*, echo the “rise of the hero by a sudden stroke of good fortune, or by knightly feats of heroic courage” (Lemay, 1986, p. 350). Instances of *luck*, like stumbling upon the orchard and when the man finds the first-aid kit and a flare pistol, “Well, I was hoping it was there. It was mostly luck” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 257) seem to sporadically appear throughout the novel and keeps them alive another day. This echoes one of the sides of Benjamin Franklin’s American Dream; the rise from “Rags to Riches”, although ragged Dick, even at his lowest point, is more fortunate than the boy from *The Road*. The other side of the American Dream may also be read as the rise from “Impotence to Importance” or from dependence to independence. Although not intentionally seeing as it is not until the father dies that the boy becomes fully independent, but the novel portrays the growing independence of the boy as the father prepares him for the time after his death and when the boy becomes truly independent. In addition, the boy is the only source of hope and optimism in the novel, like the American Dream has been for so many hoping for a better life.

He also stumbles upon morels (McCarthy, 2007, p. 40), which ironically provide negative calories, but is nonetheless a product of nature, but remains far from sufficient for any form of self-sustaining production for future sustainability. The apples, as well as the orchard they once grew, are decaying and evaporating elements alluding to the myth of the garden of Eden that derives from the “Puritan vision of a sanctified national mission in an Edenic paradise” (Brewton, 2004, p. 124). This in addition to the temporal bunker represents safety, promise, abundance, and signifies according to Sheehan “the final erasure of American’s national mythology, that find its epicenter at the nature culture nexus. Nature, then, is first linked to civilization, and then used to show its decline” (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 98).

In *Childe Roland* the grotesque landscape that Roland must traverse is also a torment in itself, “Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve: / For flowers—as well expect a cedar grove!” (l. 56-57). Browning creates, like his famous painter poems, a stark contrast by juxtaposing the early quattrocento art, which were as Bristow claims, “Idealist, spiritually pure and noble” (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 96). The world of Roland is deprived of everything that makes man and civilization good and nothing can cure this place but judgment’s fire he says (l.65). Further Biblical associations appear: “Cedar,” which suggests nobility and religious devotion. It was used in the building of

Solomon's temple and the word "grove" itself holds associations with Pagan idolatry (Browning et al., 2010, p. 357), similarly evident in *The Road*: "What they came to was a cedar wood" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 99). Furthermore, the grass itself, in *Childe Roland*, resembles the walking living dead of *The Road*, bent on violence, malnourished, jealous and diseased. "If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk / Above its mates, the head was chopped—bruised as to baulk (l.67-68)" and "As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair / In leprosy—thin dry blades pricked the mud" (l.73-74). There is nothing prominent and fruitful in the landscape of *Childe Roland*. It is a desolate desert of his own making that only furthers his resolve to find the Dark Tower.

*Childe Roland* is an example of Browning testing the cultural conventions and assumptions of his society. A society which was, as E. Warwick Slinn suggests, within "an age of growing challenges to established knowledge" (Joseph Bristow, 2000, p. 48). In the age of uncertainty and disbelief, poetic forms "shift emphasis" (Joseph Bristow, 2000, p. 47). The poet can no longer proclaim certainty and the focus shifts to the process of discovery, enlightenment, pursuit and movement forward, but arriving nonetheless as an end if incertitude. The apocalyptic landscape of both *The Road* and *Childe Roland* reflect the increasing difficulties of uncertainty within two societies with exceedingly rapid technological advances.

What the landscapes ultimately do in both works is fulfill not only narrative and allegorical but also characterizing functions. Luce points this out in regards to *The Road*, but this is also evident in *Childe Roland* as Williams discusses. The gazes' of the man from *The Road* and Roland from *Childe Roland* organize and construct the landscapes as much as the respective topologies. It is in the very manner of perception and personal description of the protagonists' individual description of the landscape and their surrounding encounters that reveal their mind's eye of the transformed land and inhabitants.

The landscape imagery of *The Road* is mediated by the man's gaze which often evokes the iconography and compositional strategies of the American landscape tradition—especially, but not exclusively—those of nineteenth-century luminists (Monk, 2012, p. 67). Many Transcendentally influenced nineteenth-century American landscape painters worked under the assumption that light is "the alchemistic medium by which the landscape artist turns matter into spirit" (Novak, 2007b, p. 36). Luminists strove to capture the "atmospheric realisms" of light and through them, as

Luce suggests, capture their “spiritual equivalences” (Novak, 2007a, p. 100). She points out how “Many instances of landscapes that are represented in McCarthy’s works are scenes framed within a static and clearly defined vantage point approximating a painted landscape” (Monk, 2012, p. 69). The mirage of landscape and familiar scenes ranging from ocean, forest, mountain, shopping store, domestic house, etc. create a melancholic and luminous sensation that add to the foreboding rather than numinous atmosphere of the novel.

In similar fashion, Browning paints the alienated and grotesque landscape described through Roland’s questionable mind. The defamiliarization and gloom echo throughout the poem creating a profound sense of unease. This is what the Mid-nineteenth-century American landscape painters, as Miller suggests, tend to do, they:

Deemphasize the presence of human concerns and artifacts.” Further, “[i]nstead of mountains connoting spiritual aspiration, waterfalls giving rise to thoughts of purity and resolution, or forest interiors offering sanctuary to the religious devotee, such landscapes incline toward the flat and unprepossessing... [T]hey are deserted, forlorn, at times even blank or eerily elusive;...[T]hey belong under the traditional rubric of ‘desert’ places” (Miller, 1993, pp. 194-195).

The landscapes of *The Road* echo these motifs and depict a land depleted of color and light such as in this depiction of the sea:

Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of. Out on the tidal flats lay a tanker held careened. Beyond that ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash (McCarthy, 2007, p. 230).

The lack of ocean blue understandably disappoints the boy, but even more so disappoints the father having perhaps one of his last hopes ruined. They sit with their heels dug in attempting to perceive through a “wall of smog across the horizon...Cold. Desolate. Birdless” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 230). It is another reminder of the senseless hopelessness the father must absolve.

Glass floats covered with gray crust. The bones of seabirds. At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as the eye could see like an isocline of death- One last salt sepulcher (McCarthy, 2007, p. 237).

The novel persistently echoes extinction from the apocalyptic beast and its “alabaster bones” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 2), “the ribs of fishes” (237) to the closing brook trout with its “vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes” (306-307). A contrast of a planned and organized world through maps and mazes only to be eternally puzzled over and remaining unsolved and misunderstood while forever wondering astray. The ocean in *The Road* functioned as a beacon of hope that they created out of nothing. However as they eventually find out there is not much hope to be found in the vast and barren sea.

Their past is reflected in their renovated landscape and father’s memory while the ocean takes away further fuel from their dimming fire. Ocean life is absent and birdless. The ship is wrecked, the ocean becomes more as Luce suggests, “a cauldron vaguely animated by something alien” (Monk, 2012, p. 70). As the name of the stranded boat reveals: Pájaro de Esperanza (Bird of hope) their situation is hopeless and wrecked. David C. Miller argues that shipwreck-in-progress in nineteenth-century American landscapes frequently evokes the foundering ship of state, calling for energetic human action (Monk, 2012, p. 70), but in *The Road*, the boat is wrecked and decaying which adds to the already stockpile of images and feelings of aftermath as it “looks back to heroic and morally tendentious moment of shipwreck” (Miller, 1993, p. 195).

While visiting the National Gallery in London I came upon *A Shipwreck* painted by Jean-Louis-André-Théodore Géricault. It struck me at once because it reminded me directly of the scene when the man from *The Road* jumps naked into the ocean in order to scavenge the wreck of Pájaro de Esperanza. His painting is linked to his more famous and iconic French Romantic painting *The Raft of Medusa*, which depicts the aftermath of a French naval frigate. And as Licia Faxon suggests, “The symbol of the shipwreck...stands as a warning of human limitations and frailty, and as a sign of the mutability of human life and fortunes” (Faxon, p. 831). Miller takes a larger perspective proclaiming that the image of the wrecked ship depicts “a transition from a traditional view of the world that is God- and human-centered, historicist, and

dramatically conceived to one that could be characterized as radically impersonal, primitivistic... and atmospherically conceived. The latter is a world in which God no longer clearly presides” (Miller, 1993, p. 196).

### 3.2 The Blind Self

One of the crucial Apocalypse archetypes that Edward F. Edinger discusses in his book *Archetype of the Apocalypse* is the apocalyptic Lamb with its seven eyes, the “eyes of God”. “The coming of the Self into visibility is accompanied by the ego’s experience of being looked at, being stripped of all disguises and *seen for exactly what one is*” (Edinger & Elder, 2002, p. 48: emphasis mine). It entails the nature of the “Final Judgment,” which as Edinger implies is “no fabrication of priests imposed on human beings from the outside; it is, in fact, an archetypical psychic reality projected from the unconscious into mythological material” (Edinger & Elder, 2002, pp. 48-49). He further claims that all religions of the world bear this notion of “Final Judgment—not necessarily coming in some future time, as in the Book of Revelation, but coming just after death” (Edinger & Elder, 2002, p. 49). Browning and McCarthy in *Childe Roland* and *The Road*, judge their contemporary societies revealing their underlying spiritual and moral blindness through death, religious affiliations and optimism, and perception that characterize the protagonists in both works.

First and foremost, one of the prevalent themes of *Childe Roland* is death. However the ending of *Childe Roland* remains problematic as discussed by Orr. “When Roland sounds his slughorn and announces that he has come, we should not know, but that he lives to tell the tale, whether in doing this he incurs, or is escaping, the general doom” (Orr, 1896, pp. 273-274). The central problem is resolving the true object of the quest. Line 176 suggests the Dark Tower is the object, which many critics such as Williams, argue is in the preparation of death (Williams, 1983), but the fact that Roland takes the direction from “That hoary cripple, with malicious eye” (l. 22) *despite* knowing that “all agree” (l. 14) he is pointing the direction of the Dark Tower (l.10-15) makes Roland’s decision and identifying the real objective more puzzling.

In *The Road*, death is also a blatantly obvious theme. There is certainly no lack of it in any shape and form. Crisp corpses litter the scorched plains either hanging or clinging to the ground, the suicide of the mother, and the horde of zombie-like

cannibals that now occupy the new world scavenging the remaining human supply, keeps the notion of death lurking around every page of the novel. In addition the conversation between the boy and the old world thespian man are often of death:

Are we going to die?

Sometime. Not now.

...

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay (McCarthy, 2007, p. 9).

Secondly, the infatuation and obsession with death leads inexplicably to the matter of what happens next and on a much darker note perhaps; what is the meaning of it all. There is an underlying religious attitude and optimism prevalent in both *The Road* and *Childe Roland*.

The method of tackling this conundrum in *The Road* is through quasi-religious sentimentality. McCarthy never affirms very much of anything like his proper nouns. The indecisiveness of it all becomes evident from the very first words spoken in the novel, “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” *Childe Roland* and *The Road*, (McCarthy, 2007, p. 3). The statement reveals the fundamental ambiguity of the novel and secular tendencies of the father. The man differs from the devout Roland and does not declare his son to be God. It is rather hypothetical in nature. In the book of Genesis, God is depicted as creating through words (Genesis 1:1-31, King James Version). “A God that does not speak is a God that does not create. Thus, the man’s declaration is that either his son is the word of God, *or*, for all practical purposes, the universe is a godless one” (Wielenberg, 2010, p. 1). However, there is no certainty postulated of any such thing. The father and son occasionally discuss their reunion after death in addition to joining the deceased mother, but their belief in what will happen after death is left vague and unanswered along with the question of God’s existence. This ambiguity and unwillingness to provide any answer reflects the underlying prevalent doubt and spiritual and sensory blindness that resonates in both

Roland and the man questioning faith and his own individual struggles pertaining to self, depicted by my third point; their individual dimming and blackening perceptions.

The act of revealing or “seeing”, as mentioned earlier, is often portrayed in a prophetic manner. Often the solution is set in the future seeing as the present is usually depicted as unpleasant and functions to give hope under such poor circumstances. The apocalyptic grayness of *The Road* attests to this. “He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading into memory” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 17). The man constantly strives to *see* through the intensity of their bleak reality, “We cant just lie here. He looked around but there was nothing to see. He spoke into a blackness without depth or dimension” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 70). The man’s perceptions are futile and seemingly useless:

A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must (McCarthy, 2007, p. 14).

The “tottering” father is almost predestined to fail along with the “chronicles” of his lineage. He is the secular element juxtaposed by both biblical allusion and the morally divine boy who constantly helps the father to see: “I think nobody found them. You cant see the house from the road. We saw it. *You saw it*” (McCarthy, 2007 ,emphasis mine). The man’s eyes are closed yet his arms are open like crucified Jesus ready to sacrifice himself on a moments notice for his son. There is no new fall. Man has already fallen, alluding to both original sin and the steady decline of humanity that they are currently experiencing first hand. The man is fading into the relic past of soon to be, if not already, non-existent history while the boy wonders with a dim aura of light into the future, “He’d stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and



then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 293).

Roland also struggles with his perceptions. This is portrayed when he reaches the Tower, “The round squat turret, blind as the fool’s heart / Built of brown stone, without counterpart” (l. 181-82). “Fool” is reiterated a mere 3 lines back and despite “Blind” meaning “windowless” in the architectural sense, “Blind” has strong connotations to spiritual darkness in both OT and NT especially in the *Matthew* “Woe unto you, ye blind guides...Ye fools and blind” (Matthew 23:16, King James Version) and “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God” (*Psalms* 6:1, King James Version). In addition as Roland points out:

Not see? Because of night perhaps?—Why, day  
Came back again for that! Before it left, (l. 187-188)  
...  
Not hear? When noise was everywhere! It tolled  
Increasingly like a bell. Names in my ears,  
Of all the lost adventures my peers,—  
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,  
And such fortunate, yet each of old  
Lost, lost! One moment knelled the woe of years (l. 193-198)

Roland, despite the light of day and noise everywhere can neither “hear” nor “see” (Thompson, 1967, p. 351). His senses, like that of the man from *The Road*, fail him. *Childe Roland* and *The Road* are works that juxtapose Christian, Pagan and secular elements into a circular structure representing man’s constant struggle for meaning in life and after death depicted by the protagonists’ blind perceptive senses.

### 3.3 The Industrial Nightmare

In *The Road*, cataclysms run rapid in the new world. The man and the boy live life under extremely hazardous conditions. Their general safety is always under scrutiny. Even when, as often happens by chance or luck, they stumble upon the old fallout shelter with a richness of a vanished world (McCarthy, 2007, p. 47). Although the edenic bunker postpones their immediate starvation, it remains a temporary and

finite and provides no real assurance for fecundity. Their temporal garden must even be safeguarded, as the father must take precautions to hide the entrance from possible intruders. The safety nets presumed to have been previously provided by society are now gone. As Murphet suggests:

On the one hand, in tune with an old strand of frontier-dwelling Christianity, the species *homo sapiens* is presented as innately a fallen one, humanized only by a diet of bloodshed that willy-nilly increases the burden of its guilt; on the other, and given that very Hobbesian condition of *homo homini lupens*, minimal protection and safeguards would seem to be required to keep the beast of neighborly appetite from the door (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 121).

The post-industrial world has truly fallen. The road south towards the ocean is littered with ruined cities, overgrown highways and broken down vehicles such as the symbolic cars and trains of America, all of which the boy is near oblivious to in regards to function and purpose like the boy's understanding of Christmas. "He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn't sure what these might mean to the boy" (McCarthy, 2007, p.191-192).

There's a train in the woods.

A train?

Yes.

A real train?

Yes. Come on. (McCarthy, 2007, p. 189).

The locomotive engine is sedentary and dead. The only thing that they could do was sit and watch "Nothing moved" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 190). The hope and drive placed in the machine and technology "ran out of fuel" (191). The vestiges of progress through speed and technologic wonders of the post-industrial age are exposed by the organic and mechanical rib cages strut around the apocalyptic landscapes. The breakdown of machinery depicts the breakdown of the backbone of Western society, identity, values, and history—not to mention the driving myths themselves. The railroad itself was the backbone of both British and American Expansion—the veins of the nation. The faith and imagery that was poured into literature and art was

abundant and depicted as both horrible and blessed—especially in America. The automobile became a symbolic incarnation of values (utilitarianism, self-reliance, individualism, and the fixation on the nuclear family) (Freese & Harris, 2004, p. 214). In the post-apocalyptic future, man's ignorance has vaulted them back into the dark ages of ignorance and dirt. The man's world like the train "would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 192).

Man is showing signs of falling a level in the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. They resemble Caliban more than Prospero—a result like the thought of La Bruyère "that too much inequality was the work of sinful man, but the inequality necessary for order and decency was God's law (as cited in, Shklar, 1984, p. 93). Ely from *The Road* now lives like an animal and as he says "You don't want to know the things I've eaten" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 183). Even the man and boy resemble animals in some form. The boy, "like a cat licking its reflection in a glass" (205), the father had, "trained him to lie in the woods like a fawn" (124) a "hibernating animal" (103) or together "tramping in the sand like parade horses (250)" and for a brief moment the man *saw* the absolute truth of the world (138).

The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (McCarthy, 2007, p. 138).

However, the man and the boy appear to have more reason and morals compared to the "bad guy" cannibals that perform animal like cruelties on each other.

They trudge through a repetitive circle of life wondering towards a hopefully more hospitable location while coming in contact with the grotesque realities of human nature along the way. Infant grilling (McCarthy, 2007, p. 212) and human cattle locked in the basement for later eating (McCarthy, 2007, p. 116) are a few of the cruelties that people prove capable of questioning the fundamental morals of mankind.

### 3.3.1 Apocalyptic Warning

Similar to the function of The Book of Revelation, *The Road* and *Childe Roland* function as symbols of warning and revelation. Browning was no activist, but he held great respect to some of his contemporaries that were. The influence of his contemporary Thomas Carlyle and Elizabeth Barrette's *The Cry of Children* (1843) argues Erdman (1957) is also evident in *Childe Roland*. Erdman did not disagree with the wide array of allegorical sources, but he could not accept that Browning's experience was limited to booklore and the hazards of essentially private and personal quest. He did not want to simply add *The Cry of Children* to the list of sources but called attention that *Childe Roland* also echoes social and political components of the motifs of this wasteland poem and that Browning might have been haunted by the cries of competitive struggle, the publicized wretchedness of works in mines and mills (Erdman, 1957, p. 422).

A closer look into Browning's apocalyptic landscape reveals the aftermath of the industrial consequences and societal fallacies. The evil Tower and the ambush of "The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay" (l. 190) spring up from the parched "dearth" of a waste land. Roland's quest can be perceived as the search for explanations, quite similar to *The Road*, which are never truly revealed, pointing back to the grail motif of right question mentioned previously. The landscape of *Childe Roland* is "littered with symbolic stage properties and asks questions partially drawing out the implications of competitive struggle, factory miseries, and evil strife ruining a world" (Erdman, 1957, p. 428). Tennyson, "ascribed the evils of cut-throat commerce and war to the viciousness of "Nature red in tooth and claw" (as cited in, Erdman, 1957, p. 429).

In *Childe Roland*, Nature is described as viciousness in relation to "Progress" in highly suggestive terms. Like the man and the boy from *The Road*, Roland marches through gray plains with stern determination, "I might go on; nought else remained to do" (l. 54) where nature is "starved" and "ignoble"; "nothing throve" (l. 56). Flowers, a sign of beauty, are terminal and weeds struggle viciously against one another.

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk  
Above its mates, the head was chopped—the bents  
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents

In the dock's harsh swarth leaves—bruised as to baulk  
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk  
Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents (l. 67-72).

The holes, docks, and rents echo the oppressed people of the ghettos of London and harsh disease ridden areas of the city. In *The Cry of the Children*, the young flowers blowing in the meadows are contrasted to the children dying in the dark, to whom “cowslips of the meadows” (l. 61) can only be imagined in terms of “our weeds anear the mine” (l. 62) (Erdman, 1957, p. 429). In both dark visions of *Childe Roland* and *The Cry of Children*, weeds are the only thing that exist and symbolic of the imprisoned and slaved of the oppressive and cruel economic system; ever striving and endlessly trying to overgrow one another for the benefits of the sun.

The creatures of Nature are slaves. The predicament of the land in *Childe Roland* and its “prisoners” (l. 66) is “strange” (l. 62) or hard to understand, “but whether one sees it or not says Nature, nothing can be done to stop the laws of poverty and ugliness (“grimace”); progress is at an end and the land is bankrupt” (Erdman, 1957, p. 430):

...penury, inertness, and grimace,  
In some strange sort, were the land's portion. “See  
Or shit your eyes”—said Nature peevishly—  
“It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:  
The judgment's fire alone can cure this place,  
Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free.” (l. 61-66)

The bleak hopelessness of the laissez-faire social attitude “Let each one bear his lot” as personified through Nature: “I cannot help my case” is expressed by Browning as requiring an apocalypse for any sort of renewal or renovation of the world and the imprisoned “clods” (l. 66) (Erdman, 1957, pp. 430-431). To purify to the purest state through calcine<sup>5</sup> alludes to the fires of the Last Judgment in *Revelation* or elsewhere in the Bible pertaining to the concept of “fire as a purifying agent with regard to the

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<sup>5</sup> Calcine: to burn (something) to powder, from 'calx', the Latin word for quicklime, but used in English as an alchemical term denoting a powder produced by thoroughly burning a mineral or metal and reducing it to its purest state. OED (Browning et al., 2010, p. 357)

earth itself; the closest parallel is *Revelation* xx 9-15, in which fire from heaven destroys God's enemies, an event that immediately precedes the Last Judgment and the vision of the New Jerusalem in ch. xxi" (Browning et al., 2010, p. 357).

Further *victims* of Nature's cruelty appear when Roland suddenly comes upon a river "As unexpected as a serpent comes" (l. 110), which also holds elements of the garden myth in regards to the river and serpent. However, as Erdman suggests, "Nature's inescapable or inevitable cruelty is again in the image of a fiendish and 'spiteful' black river that 'frothed by,' injuring the alders and willows on its banks" (Erdman, 1957, p. 431):

So petty yet so spiteful! all along,  
Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;  
Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit  
Of mute despair, a suicidal throng:  
The river which had done them all wrong,  
Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit (l. 115-120).

The savage treatment of man against man relates back to Roland's description of the traces of a bloody human struggle in the wasteland—all of which allude to the dubious battles of history and factory miseries of the Victorian period.

There is much savagery in *The Road* as well. However the nostalgic and seemingly endless American scenario of "us. vs. them"<sup>6</sup> of transferring mythology of an old enemy to a new dissolves into anonymous "man vs. man". The foreign other is now just fellow man, not any particular race, status or particular grouping of the American melting pot or any other nation, which will inevitably deplete the planet of humans. Whatever the nameless event that caused the catastrophe has also eradicated all cultural borders along with language, society and history leaving the world split between blurry lines of moral and ethical choice pertaining to whether they eat people or not that further echo the cruelties of man.

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<sup>6</sup> Slotkin discusses how Kennedy and his advisers settled on the use of "The New Frontier". Their approach struck a cord within the general public and as they were well aware of, it was intelligible to the widest possible audience. The ideals of the West and all of the contradictions of consciousness that entail are imposed upon the audience in order to revive the American economy political dynamism and empower the *nation's* identity to sustain its role as a Great Power. This was to be more than simple affiliation of nostalgia and those persuaded to identify with Kennedy's heroic political scenario. It united the nation as one and elevated the "us vs. them" scenario, replacing the savage Native Americans with the new red Communists (Slotkin, 1998, pp. 2-3).

When Roland crosses the river, he presumes that he is stepping upon corpses and upon spearing a water rat he hears “a baby’s shriek” (l. 126). However this also echoes the children in *The Cry of the Children* working in the factory which “curses” (l. 159) the “mailéd heel” (l. 155) treading on the child-workers in its merchant adventures as they “sob” (l. 159) and “weep” (l. 148) (Erdman, 1957, p. 431). The river may be read as the mill stream and that on the opposite bank, Roland sees a “horrid mews” (l. 135) (Erdman, 1957, p. 431):

Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage  
Whose savage trample this could pad the dank  
Soil to splash? Toads in a poisoned tank,  
Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage—  
The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque (l. 129-133).

Then, Roland asks a significant question: “What kept them there, with all the plain to choose?” (l. 134). Erdman suggests that “there” alludes to the mill and after Roland comes up some devilish machinery implies the same root to the question proposed by Barrette’s *The Cry of Children*: “why the children are not playing in the meadows” (Erdman, 1957, pp. 431-432). The answer being the machinery

### 3.3.2 Progress measured by Technology

Machines were and are still a symbol of progress. They would become labor saving devices that would allow man to prosper and grow, replacing manpower with machine power. However as Thomas Jefferson was aware, they had consequences. His ideal was to harvest the power of machine for good. Jefferson’s hope was that the technology and the intrinsic good that knowledge would bring would be transformative, bridging the gap between the wilderness and society of the middle landscape, which would be the locus of both economic and moral value (L. Marx, 1967, p. 150). However Jefferson was already blinded by his own rural ideals. The new technology was intrinsically linked to the new factory miseries of England, which echo in *Childe Roland* and which the aftermath can be seen in *The Road*.

Even today the general public is dumbfounded by technology. Curtis White discusses two forms of the technological imagination America. The first is the

innocent process of invention. Technology feeds, cures, and propels us to the point of religious ecstasy (Freese & Harris, 2004, p. 130). It fits perfectly within the framework of historical and human progress—everything becomes better, faster, smaller and more efficient. In this sense, Jefferson can be seen to be under the technological trance, replacing slaves with machines for personal and individual growth and freedom. D.H. Lawrence commented, “...the most idealist nations invent most machines. America simply teems with mechanical inventions, because nobody in America ever wants to do anything. They are idealists. Let a machine do the thing” (Lawrence, 1971, p. 38). However there is a price to pay for technological progress and gadget luxury, something that the manufacturing industrial slums of London or the millions of modern day slaves connote to. The second form reveals the problem of justifying the “good” side of invention, which is always context dependent. Technological advancements are not just for the benefits of man, but for global corporation and military purposes—in other words “the economy” (Freese & Harris, 2004, p. 131).

To the layman, the technological and scientific mumbo jumbo becomes something incomprehensible. Scientists have their own jargon and are left to work on their creations in secrecy. The general public may not be able to understand the technicalities of how a smartphone or a nuclear bomb function, but their social imagination is not limited by those boundaries and “facts” and comprehension cease to be relevant. The danger of ignorance becomes paramount. Technology becomes a false symbol of progress in the moral sense seeing as it becomes the root cause of so much injustice. Cruelty is ignored and allowed for the “greater good” of the selected few or for the transformation towards “progress” of mankind.

### **3.3.3 Transformation**

The idea of transformation is nothing new. A popular representation of transformation is the image of the frog stemming from the Book of Revelation. It appears, as Edinger points out, in the sixteenth chapter where the “bowls of God’s anger” are being emptied over the earth (Edinger & Elder, 2002, p. 130):

The sixth angel emptied his bowl over the great river Euphrates; all the water dried up so that a way was made for the kings of the East to come in



[from Parthia, the dangerous enemy at the time]. Then from the jaws of dragon and beast and false prophet I saw three foul spirits come; they looked like frogs and in fact were demon spirits, able to work miracles, going out to all the kinds of the world to call them together for the war of the Great Day of God the Almighty. (16:12-14)

The frogs and toads are as Jung observes, “the first attempt of nature towards making something like a man... so they are symbols for human transformation” (Jung). They have a transformative quality by metamorphosing from tadpoles to amphibian adults. The fairy tale of *The Frog Prince* springs to mind (Edinger & Elder, 2002, pp. 130-131). The “Toads in in a poisoned tank” (l. 131) depicts man’s lowered and animalistic slave-like status dwelling in an inferior and “poisoned” (l. 131) environment.

A recurring theme in Browning’s poetry has been in regards to the injustices wrought on women stemming from Biblical scripture. In this sense the unexpected serpent of a river may also be alluding to the snake that lures Eve to take the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. The purpose is not to lay blame on woman, but to shift focus on the very fact that they have and still are abused by society and foremost institutions, especially the Catholic Church. Browning’s recurring concern was how people in power, within their respective institutions, abused the scripture for their own personal gains, beliefs and fallacies. *Childe Roland* differs in its dealings with contemporary social and moral issues compared to *The Road*, which deals with more recent problems of global warming and threats of nuclear war. However they converge in placing the blame on man for the cruelties of the world.

The fault is akin to the machines, which subsequently falls back on man’s own fault as the root cause of cruelty. As Woolford, Karlin and Phelan suggest, “Roland’s image is typically dense (or confused): the willows (probably the variety known as ‘weeping willow’) are compared to women throwing themselves into the river because they have been ‘wronged’ (their leaning attitude reinforces the idea that they are ‘fallen women’); at the same time the river is the lover who has ‘done them all the wrong’” (Browning et al., 2010, pp. 360-361). In the same suicidal despair, the “fallen women” similar to the mother from *The Road* are victims driven to suicide due to their respective occidental societies. Even the protagonists struggle and clamber to

any form of hope. Roland seeks death and the man and the boy from *The Road* contemplate ending it all as well.

McCarthy also alludes to the injustices of populations under the hierarchy of others. The man and boy are post-apocalyptic refugees echoing the countless refuges that inhabit the contemporary world. “He looked like something out of a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 123). They have in retrospect become another of America’s homeless traversing the ruined and nameless streets of a lost consumer nation, “shoppers in the commissaries of hell” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 192) and a witness to tomb like palimpsest billboards of “advertisements for goods which no longer existed” (135).

The imagination of the reader does not have to stretch far to assume the cause. The end of the world could come from a myriad of things such as nuclear warfare, terrorist attacks, global warming or some natural catastrophe like a meteor or volcanic eruption. Yet it remains unsaid like the names of most of the characters and places in the novel, which distances it from McCarthy’s usual Western tropes and focus on names. McCarthy’s withholding tactics can be read as the feature of trauma in that it is unsayable and as defined by what Cathy Caruth has called “the impossibility... of direct access” (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). Presumably, it is people that have brought about their own demise and there is no cure or real hope of a solution. An alarm clock effect: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 54). Time and the world as they knew it was over. They are traversing upon their self-made rapture and it is time to wake up and act.

McCarthy’s cannibals are more zombies than vampire. As Sheehan discusses,

It has become a truism to note, in the popular-cultural imaginary, a resurgence of those two perennial envoys of the un-human, zombies and vampires. But although both practice anthropophagy, they elicit very different registers of feeling. Zombies are agents of pure horror, inspiring revulsion and abhorrence; vampires, conversely, possess an aura of aristocratic elegance and sexual charisma, by turns attractive and repellent. Yet both creatures gothic-mythological allure puts them at a distance from cannibals, who are all-too-human, as ethnographic studies have shown. Or rather, cannibals belong to nature, rather than (or as well as) mythology, which may account for the abiding

fascination shown by colonial studies scholars<sup>7</sup>. One of the more unpleasant ironies of *The Road*, then, is that as nature recedes towards extinction, one of its most rebarbative spawn undergoes a corresponding increase (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 94).

Karl Marx was the first to note the similarities between vampiric hunger and rapacious capitalism. “Capital is dead labour”, Marx writes “which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour and lives the more, the more labour it sucks<sup>8</sup>” (as cited in, Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 95). The cannibal, in contrast, is the anti capitalist par excellence. Instead of limitless accumulation, the cannibal survives by devouring his own kind, a figure of pure, non-replenishable consumption (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 95). The affects of zero-sum game move into effect<sup>9</sup>.

*The Road* redescribes American achievement as “so much cultural and industrial detritus, and exposes communal bonds as (at best) a cover for naked self-interest, nevertheless brought to the fore some tendentious and rarefied commentaries” (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 90). In one instance, the father finds himself reading the relic newspaper filled with curious news and quaint problems of the past, “at eight the primrose closes” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 28). “Primrose” alludes to the phrase primrose path: “an appealing course or route; esp. the pursuit of pleasure, which might bring ruin or disastrous consequences” (OED) or perhaps vestiges of the American Dream. Constantly the unanswered question of what caused the apocalypse springs to mind, which allude to the fall of man, the relentless stripping of the Earth’s resources and waging of war in blind ignorance. *The Road* becomes a collage of manmade decisions that each on their own could have, and might, lead humanity down the darkening path. The current trajectory however, as the father perceives it, is already closed and the time of ease and pleasure a mere memory. His only hope and warrant is in the continuity through his son. He places his hope and heritage for the future in the boy. And as the father dies, so do the vestiges of his vanished world.

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<sup>7</sup> (Hulme, 1998)

<sup>8</sup> (K. Marx, 1990, p. 342)

<sup>9</sup> The economic standpoint in connection with constantly receding area of free land is what Smith (Smith, 1978) terms a non-zero-sum game. This was in relation to the American frontiersmen and the myth built upon the notion of endless abundance stemming from the Garden Myth and seeing as how America as well as the planet itself is finite and not infinite.

The man dies symbolizing the cause and failure of a consumer nation born out of the industrial age hoping his son and his new companions will do it better.

### 3.4 Fear of God

The man from *The Road* is consumed with fear of others and as mentioned previously portraying symptoms of madness. It does not come as a surprise that the man from *The Road* should be vulnerable to psychological turmoil and fear given his circumstance. However his behavior and interpersonal skills restrict him and his son from ever finding the discussed “good guys” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 261). It is not until the end, shortly after the father dies, that the boy again is *lucky*. As his father predicts, the boy meets the previously discussed nice people that “could be carrying the fire too” (231) providing an assurance of hope in the otherwise dim novel. For any chance of hope and sustainable future, the hope lies in the community. Roland and the man choose seclusion and end up dead.

Roland from *Childe Roland* is also consumed with fear of others and displays symptoms of madness. He is like “a sick man very near to death” (l. 25). Similar to the man from *The Road*, Roland has passed his later mediate stage of life. The dimming segments of their temporal lives have been a long and futile quest. Browning did give qualified assent to J.W Chadwick’s suggestion that the meaning of the poem could be summed up in the words of *Mathew*<sup>10</sup> “he that endureth to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 10:22, King James Version) and endure he does. However, the distrust and tension created between the reader and Roland through Browning’s use of the dramatic monologue leaves the reader questioning Roland’s true character and motive creating room for doubt.

The fear evident in both *The Road* and *Childe Roland* can be seen as a result of two religious nations. The vestiges of America’s Puritan heritage may be perceived through its proneness to hypocrisy and to antihypocrisy. As Judith N. Schklar suggests, Puritans are exigent and fearful “They suffer from an inner tug of war as intense as the perpetual accusations they thrust on others, because they are terrified of their own weaknesses and suspicious of their neighbors’ lapses. Fear of the real self is added to fear of God” (Shklar, 1984, p. 50). The religious Victorian middle class believed in chastity, monogamy, thrift, charity, and work, much in line with the

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<sup>10</sup> See The Christian Register for January 19, 1888; see also Lippincott’s Magazine 45:683-91.

conservatives of America—And as Shklar asks, did they not want to be what they proclaimed for everyone else? The fact that not everyone achieved these goals is not what made them hypocrites.

Only their refusal to admit that the endless slums of Mayhew's London even existed—that is, only their complacency— was hypocritical. They were hypocrites because they hid something evil when it was in their interest to do so. Sexual repression and emotional silence, however, are self-inflicted wounds, not social crimes or hypocrisy...Theirs was the self hatred that marks all puritanism (Shklar, 1984, pp. 54-55).

Today, the religious community still struggle. Christopher Hitchens describes religion as immoral and a continuing cause of sexual repression, violence and ignorance in his book *God is not great* (Hitchens, 2009) and in *The Missionary Position* (Hitchens, 1995) attacks Mother Theresa and how Catholic charity goes terribly wrong. Institutions were always Browning's enemies, but the Catholic Church especially. In addition, numerous questions of human morality seem to be absent when unsettled and shrinking middle class is left in a shroud of doubt by their government officials, media outlets, and the merchants of doubt scientists that is discussed in *Merchants of Doubt* (Oreskes, 2010). In their book, Conway and Oreskes tell the story of a group of scientists who fought the scientific evidence and spread confusion on many of the most important issues of our time "It is a story about a pattern that continues today. A story about fighting facts, and merchandising doubt" (Oreskes, 2010, p. 9). The startling revelation is that despite having general scientific consensus, the facts are distorted and arguments are founded that deliberately cause ignorance and doubt. Like the tobacco industry that created its own think tank of scientists in order to create a product of doubt advocating that smoking does not cause cancer. They attacked the reputation and legitimacy of the scientists that were trying to find the link between smoking and death. And now tobacco is replaced with global warming, leaving the general public in ignorance. The sin of the people becomes that like the spiritual and sensory blindness of the man from *The Road* and Roland from *Childe Roland*. As McCarthy himself claims "his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in" (Kushner).

As already mentioned the boy from *The Road* has often been as a new prophet with inherent Christian qualities in addition to “carrying the fire” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 136). While the father struggles with his religious doubt or is quick to dismiss God, his actions are often polarized and filled with religious ceremony. As Campbell suggests “The tribal ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, installation, and so forth, serve to translate the individual’s life crises and life-deeds into classic impersonal forms (Campbell, 1988, p. 383)”. Progress and heritage is handed down from father to son. “All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 77-78). Campbell discusses the significance of ceremony “as traditional rites of passage used to teach the individual to die to the past and be reborn to the future, so the great ceremonials of investiture divested him of his private character and clothed him in the mantle of his vocation” (Campbell, 1988, p. 15). It is within this process the son develops into his own entity and transgresses the continuity of society or whatever is left of it. “All participate in the ceremonial according to rank and function. The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. Generations of individuals pass, like anonymous cells from a living body; but the sustaining, timeless form remains” (Campbell, 1988, p. 383)

Through this quest of hopelessness, McCarthy taps into the mythic pool in order to depict how “the good old days” or “the current days” are long gone and what his predicted future will bring—following this schematic, there is an iota of hope for the future but he secularizes the religious ceremonies, not allowing any certainty or creating too much false hope. The altruism the boy alludes to a possible change and future of humanity. However, in the deteriorating moral of *The Road*, McCarthy is not so religiously sentimental and *The Road* can be read as a wish for America to get over their religious hangover (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 90). Despite a drastic change in human moral and ethic standard, *The Road* shows an indifferent planet within an indifferent universe that has already fallen.

Roland is undoubtedly stern, stubborn and resolute in his dauntless quest. However despite his heroic defiance of death, his final perception, as Philip Raisor suggests, “is the product of grief, anger and, disillusionment born of the reversal of his previous assumptions about his condition” (Davis, 1972, p. 99). Roland’s final act cannot be divorced from the shock of his awareness. Despite Browning’s own assertion of soldier like endurance and religious bearings, the poem is not conclusive.

It remains a kind of dream like that of *The Road*, where the author or whoever is concerned wakes up prior to his or her own death.

### 3.5 End of Time

The man from *The Road* and Roland from *Childe Roland* seem to be on the brink of revelation of messianic intentionality, but in the end fall back on themselves. Their perceptive and spiritual blindness can be linked to their loss of a logical position linked to Christian eschatology, which Samuel Weber points out is a fundamental aspect of the worldview of baroque melancholia and the inability to view and organize history. This view entails that history is repetitive and ineluctable process of rise and fall and “identified with the nature of a fallen creation without any discernable, representable possibility of either grace or salvation. It is the loss of eschatological perspective that renders the baroque conception of history ‘inauthentic’ and akin to a state of nature” (Weber, 1992, p. 9). *The Road* is a depiction of the after. A time that should not exist and has continued after its own death, much like *Childe Roland*, where Roland should not be alive in order to speak after reaching the ambiguous Dark Tower. They are in fact traversing the landscape of hell, and both trying to regain their spiritual balance—and as Hellyer points out in regards to *The Road*: “the walking dead in a horror film” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 57) becomes a promotional tagline of Romero’s zombie classic *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), “the living dead are said to issue from an overcrowded hell, the aimless emissaries of a world that is outside of history because it is beyond eschatology” (Murphet & Steven, 2012, p. 54).

The landscape of *Childe Roland* is that of Dante<sup>11</sup> and Roland even encounters an apocalyptic beast, literally straight out of the Bible: “A great black bird, Apollyon’s bosom-friend, / Sailed past, not beat his wide wing dragon-penned/ That brushed my cap—perchance the guide I sought” (l. 160-62). Apollyon is “the angel of the bottomless pit” in *Revelation* (Revelation 9:11, King James Version), which further estranges the credibility of Roland as to why he would follow Apollyon for guidance. Also, the “woe of years” (l. 198) may allude to John’s statement in Revelation, “And I beheld, and head an angel flying though the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of

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<sup>11</sup> See Browning’s ‘*Childe Roland*’ and Dante’s *Inferno* (Sullivan, 1967)

the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!” (Revelation 8:13, King James Version).

In *The Road*, the novel opens with an image of a dream and ends in one adding weight to the description of post-apocalyptic nightmare. The first dream-image is of a cave where he meets *The Road*'s version of the apocalyptic beast itself:

...a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the brimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark (McCarthy, 2007, p. 1-2).

The man from *The Road* and Roland from *Childe Roland* are depicted as the walking members of The Rapture, left alone to face the wrath of God's angels and monsters while the just have been removed from earth and safely deposited in heaven.

However, an intriguing connection, as Starzyk points out, is the circularity of *Childe Roland*. Since the poem concludes with its title, he compares it to that of the snake with its tail in its mouth. Following the logical direction of circularity after the opening line “My first thought was...” (l. 1) there should be a second. However as Starzyk notes, there is no such verbal division found in the poem, however when in the instance where Roland's self is seen, he is a living frame for one “last” picture (Starzyk, 1998, p. 15), which concludes the poem not in *seeing* and *finding* the Tower, but being *found* and *seen*. Roland had been “training for the sight” (l.180) all of his life, yet when the poem ends, it is not in triumph but in Roland himself being *seen*. Starzyk examines the possibility that Browning regarded *Childe Roland* as an experiment in which these poetic modes could be, and in fact are, maintained in dialectical tension (Starzyk, 1998, p. 14). His “band” of predecessors in the quest he remarks “there they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met / To view the last of me, a living frame / For one more picture!” (l. 199-201). The juxtaposition, as Starzyk suggests, “of tower—of object gazing out upon the landscape—and pictures—the self subjected to an other's gaze—is dramatized at poem's end as it is in the essay on



Shelley” (Starzyk, 1998, p. 14). Terms objective and subjective are in retrospect imaginatively synthesized in order to explain not only the text but also the poetry of the poem.

*The Road* and *Childe Roland* end in full circle and depict the necessity of constructing meaning and breath life into words. This history becomes something that stands outside of time. And as the boy knew what he knew “That ever was no time at all” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 28).

### 3.5.1 Residues of History

Europe is a place with long-held traditions of traditions. As Shklar suggests, the demographic and religious history makes amply clear.

It is no use looking back to some imaginary classical or medieval utopia of moral and political unanimity, not to mention the horror of planning one for the future. Thinking about the vices, has indeed, the effect of showing precisely to what extent ours is a culture of many subcultures, ethnic inheritances of sensibility and manners, and ideological inheritances of sensibility and manners, and ideological residues whose original purpose has be now been utterly forgotten. With this in view, liberal democracy becomes more a recipe for survival than a project for the perfectibility of mankind (Shklar, 1984, p. 4).

These “residues” reside in the father from *The Road* who stands for the melting pot of moral and ethical values stemming from the Puritan derived Americans. These moral and ethical values as just mentioned are founded on tradition, history and religion, all of which in *The Road* are on a one-way trip into the void, “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 93) and stories of courage and justice become all the more irrelevant as time goes on (42). McCarthy’s focus lies in the intrinsic human kindness epitomized by the boy and the meaning created through the bond and love of him and his father. Altruism seems possible, but only through the boy, not through history and stories.

On this point, Browning would disagree with McCarthy—history is the necessary for enlightenment, growth and progress, but Christianity is the key for the

correctly understanding history. Browning would not idealize the past such as to create medieval utopias. It is no use looking back if it is under false pretenses. As Bristow suggests in regards to Browning's *The Flight of the Duchess* "Browning mocks the nostalgic conservatism encouraged by the return to the Middle Ages, where one was expected to," (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 74) "revert to the proper channels, /Workings in tapestry, paintings on panels, / And gather up woodcraft's various ambitions" (l. 232-234).

Roland's hope is founded in his faith and triumph in death, which is founded in religious history. His chivalric "Band" (l. 39) or literary legacies act as the histories and stories of the past that echo the Victorian frame of mind concerning history and the function it plays in understanding Christianity. Roland like Browning could only "hope to play my part" (l. 88) but as he shortly finds out after placing his hope in the past in order to find a solution, he finds that this was "Not it" (l. 91). Roland must dispel himself of worldly perception and convey his spiritual pursuit "I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart" (l. 85), his overreaching soldier like character "Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art" (l. 89) becomes almost nonnegotiable until his believed triumphed through his willingness to die. "Better this present than a past like that" (l. 103). But this transition and understanding is founded upon the notion of evolving and transgressing from the old—through learning and striving, which ultimately leads to a more perfect understanding of the truth. Roland reflects Browning's view on faith which "is not contingent on whether or not we can or should prove the miracles performed by Christ...Instead, it is the power of fiction making – the spiritual efficacy of creativity itself – that informed his Christianity" (J. Bristow, 1991, p. 69). All Roland has is faith, which provides meaning. This is precisely why his death is both a failure and a triumph and why the meaningless stories the father attempts to tell his son in *The Road* become tragic.

Upon Childe Roland's journey he comes upon a plain,

Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,

Than pausing to throw backward a last view

To the safe road, 'twas gone! Grey plain all round!

Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.

I might go on; nought else remained to do (l. 51-54).

Roland reveals his soldier like courage, not in the sense of being without fear, but perseverance throughout despite his fear. Roland is intuitively certain from the beginning that despite his doubts about him being “fit” that he can overcome and endure the scope of temporary horror. It is as Ransom notes, characteristic of Roland’s mind “that it *sees* intensely and attempts to congeal all elements into a single, unified perception. His mental ardor (he questions, answers, exclaims, criticizes, judges), though it reflects a vibrant mind, is directed toward synthesis rather than analysis” (Davis, 1972, p. 103). Roland’s observations of effects are specific and often microscopic and are revealed as attempts to conceive of a cause for each effect that confronts him. Lack of evidence does not hinder Roland. “No footprint leading to that horrid mew, / None out of it” (l. 135-136). “Through his sensuous imagination, he strives, by analogy or passion, to reduce all that he regards (either in past, present, or future) to concretely inflexible visions” (Davis, 1972, p. 103). Similarly, the father from *The Road* also shares this trait. McCarthy echoes *Campos de Castilla* again in the section when the father and boy reach the ocean. Like the letters scraped out by the boy, his tracks and print in history will vanish like the “wakes upon the sea” (Machado, 1978, p. 83).

### 3.5.2 Historical imagination

The loss of the historical imagination is not only through the man and the boy, but depicted in the soggy books of the post-apocalyptic. The man comes upon the charred ruins of a library “where blackened books lay in pools of water” (McCarthy, 2007, p 199) and “He’d not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation” (199). Not only are the father’s own memories repressed and forlorn, but his own sense of cultural heritage is too without language and history. What use are books and who will ever be able to read them. The transmission of knowledge is almost as bleak as their general predicament.

Can you write the alphabet?

I can write it.

We don’t work on your lessons any more.

I know.

Can you write something in the sand? (McCarthy, 2007, p. 262)

Without ink and parchment, they are left poking holes in the sand. Even primitive forms of painting and scripture from caves and tablets may survive for some time, but whatever written in sand will inevitably disappear and the value of books along with it. And with the loss of historical imagination and creativity, even Browning would have to envision a Godless and empty world.

## 4 Conclusion

In the end, *The Road* and *Childe Roland* share more than just apocalyptic motif and intertextual heritage, but also an intrinsic human drive to find meaning through allegory. The works represent the human journey and quest for meaning in an apocalyptic variation of Campbell's monomyth. Familiar archetypes appear that reinterpret the universal problems that have bewildered mankind since the beginning of time. 150 years separate the publication of *The Road* and *Childe Roland* revealing how many similar inner tensions that haunt both the religiously involved Victorians and contemporary Puritan derived Americans of today.

The comparisons and contrasts between *The Road* and *Childe Roland* suggest a more secular disposition in today's present-time compared to the Victorian past in terms of coping with the end. Both works are ambiguously open leaving plenty of room for interpretation and diverge in their variations of the monomyth and archetypes. However, *The Road* and *Childe Roland* both deal with fact and history by either distorting or discarding it. Only the symbolic is communicated, which like the "boon" will or cannot be brought back to society, leaving the reader's questions unanswered. The protagonists' of *The Road* and *Childe Roland* journey through uncompromising circumstances—yet even under the direst setting, McCarthy and Browning show how hope can be created.

What *The Road* and *Childe Roland* have in common is their portrayal of the persistent and timeless ignorance and fallacy of man. As discussed, the landscape and protagonists' perceptive insight towards the environment reveal how the individual, the collective, and planet Earth suffer due to man's destructive force. This is what first aroused my interest when I came across these two texts. *The Road* and *Childe Roland*

question mankind's moral standard and how quickly they may alter or disappear. The danger is not to allow misanthropy to take over. Hope resides in action as advocated by Browning. Inertia, ignorance and sedentary is linked with failure, sin and death—and if nothing is done, McCarthy provides a warning of what may happen after things escalate too far e.g. nuclear warfare or global warming. However, despite mankind's recurring ignorance and indifference to cruelty and self-destruction McCarthy and Browning beautifully entwine the apocalyptic with quasi-religious sentimentality of hope and love.

Hope is one of the areas where McCarthy and Browning diverge. As I have discussed, Browning saw history as an interpretative device and Christianity was the key for understanding. His philosophy of human progress was achieved through the constant improvement through art—ever striving closer and further towards a better understanding of “Truth,” however acknowledging that neither he nor anyone will obtain true certainty outside of heaven. Browning's framework emphasizes history's essentialism for progress and justification for any set of moral standard. *Childe Roland* then is a representation of this religious and inner strive to overcome despite horrendous obstacles of self and Victorian society. But like what is found in *The Road*; the quasi-religious elements that appear reflect blotches of Browning's Protestant doubt.

Roland is a layman set in the apocalyptic framework of the monomyth. The many literary parallels in *Childe Roland* not only provide dramatic effect, but also emphasize the universality of the quest and search for meaning. His environment is not only a reflection of his mental state, but of his cultural state. His stubborn resolve to endure echo Christian values, but the apocalyptic environment and borderline madness of Roland question his moral character and credibility. The poem is left ambiguous and like Browning's philosophy: certainty is impossible to reach and problematized even further under the reading that Roland comes back, but reveals nothing.

McCarthy's hope however is not founded in history. *The Road* becomes a contemporary version of the *Book of Job*. McCarthy strips the vestiges and cultural heritage away from humanity portraying them at their worst and best. He also shows that history and facts are not relevant for meaning and purpose. Mankind has an intrinsic quality to create out of thin air—forever transforming and evolving to suit the needs for the spiritually inclined. The only love and hope for the future of

mankind is not found in facts and interpretation of some text, but in the connection between the man and the boy. This is the only thing that keeps them from committing suicide while driving them forward by some unknown blind faith.

The danger and perhaps similar reasoning for such an apocalyptic distinction is Browning and McCarthy's mutual fear of mankind's fallacy. They both reveal (through apocalyptic revelation) how misplaced faith and blind adherence to deceitful mythology can lead to the popularized notion of the apocalypse—the downfall of civilization. Reading *The Road* and *Childe Roland* can be compared to waking up from a nightmare—you might not recall all the details of the story, but you are left with an ominous feeling of fear and guilt and rush to analyze what all the symbols of your dream can mean. The more you learn about this world through “world-wide wondering” (*Childe Roland*, l. 19) and lessons in history, the more depressing and difficult life may become—for every fact learned there are two new questions and the complexity and chaos of the seeming disorder of life can be daunting. The challenge becomes as McCarthy and Browning reveal, to be resolute and act against the inertia and cruelties done by man, if not, nemesis is will be wrought—like the dilemma of global warning, mankind's abuse of power scripture or inability to act against scientific consensus and physical evidence creates a spider web of doubt and confusion in addition to questioning mankind's moral foundation. The planet's habitable state and natural resources is a huge question in itself, but the fact that future generations will inherit the planet after us create moral bearings. In addition to the fact that consequences of global warming effects poverty stricken countries the worst, who are not even the main culprits of the crime. *Memento mori*—Whether that will be man's engineering or a result of mankind's moral fallacies, nature's indifference or something of the sublime is debatable, but the story will be repeated in full circle until our time in this universe reaches zero—as one dream ends, another begins.

## 5 References

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