THE NEW WORLD OF THE POST-APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION

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California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
in
English

by
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Karl Becker

Spring 2010

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DEDICATION

To my beloved bride, Laurel, who believes in me, even – and especially – when I do not; my boys, Jade and Logan; and my sweet Ava – thank you for your unfailing encouragement and for enduring this extended project and making annoying sacrifices to the Time Being. I would not, could not, have done it without you. We made it!

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ABSTRACT

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In light of a recent explosion of post-apocalyptic narratives in popular film and literature, this thesis approaches an analysis of the genre as a means of expressing deep-seated anxiety about modern consumer practices and their perceived eventual outcomes. The project explores the literary tropes that illustrate materialist practices in American culture in both post-apocalyptic works of fiction and early European encounter literature, particularly the interaction between the indigenous inhabitants and explorers of the New World and their post-apocalyptic antecedents. By examining narrative elements of the 2007 film adaptation of Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend* and Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road*, this thesis will discuss the post-apocalyptic genre as a modern transposition of pre-colonial encounter narratives. The discussion will reveal that many of the motives underlying the Conquest of the Americas shape post-apocalyptic narratives, even where they perform different functions.
While the post-apocalyptic genre attempts to communicate hypothetical outcomes to modern consumer practices, they prove also to fulfill a consumer fantasy as it is perpetuated by images of destruction, depopulation, unlimited materialism, and nightmare inhabitants that recall details from America’s imperial past.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Unveiling” Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

From the ancient Mayan calendar, famous for its forecast of the world’s end on December 21, 2012, to the latest zombie films, populated with mindless, flesh-eating fiends bent on cannibalizing all of humanity, human beings seem fascinated with the apocalyptic imagination. The term “apocalypse,” although originally derived from the Greek word meaning “unveiling” or “revelation,” has most commonly been associated with The Revelation of John, the final book of the Bible. In this context, the apostle John’s Revelation refers specifically to the coming battle and victory of God over the devil, during which time the world will be destroyed and God will draw all of his faithful to himself, bringing an end to the present era. In more recent times, however, a host of literary and film representations, stocked with a vast assortment of apocalyptic events, has emerged, portraying in vivid and horrifying detail the wildest imaginings of the end of the world. At present, the film and book markets seem inundated with post-apocalyptic stories, feeding what appears to be an insatiable popular appetite for the genre.

The focus of this thesis is to conduct a little “unveiling” as well, as I attempt to delve into the some of the deeper messages underlying this popular modern genre. My approach to this study begins with some important questions related to the genre itself, followed by specific application of those questions to two particular examples of the
genre. What literary features appear to be essential to the post-apocalyptic fiction genre? What problem or problems are fundamentally being addressed by it? To what extent is the post-apocalyptic narrative an expression of entrenched human desires, anxieties, and fears? What comprises those desires, anxieties, and fears? What historical tropes gave rise to the popularity of post-apocalyptic fiction as a viable literary genre? And finally, how are those tropes applicable to the reader’s experience of the genre?

Its recent emergence from the literary imagination of a post-nuclear modern world makes post-apocalyptic fiction a disturbingly timely statement about the human condition. Since World War II, human awareness of its own destructive capacity and its ability to produce an actual end to the world has become as lucid as ever. In his article, “Dramatizing and De-Dramatizing the End,” Klaus Scherpe states,

Not only has it [world destruction] become producible but, perhaps, even interchangeable: an ecological disaster and the catastrophic developments now underway in genetic engineering are both just as suitable for snuffing out human existence or making it unrecognizable. The producibility of the catastrophe is the catastrophe. (96)

With this awareness of our ability to produce our own doom, audiences of post-apocalyptic fiction approach the genre with expectations of certain elemental features that deliver the desired effect, as Scherpe writes, “a multi-media show with its proliferation of images, stories, and commentaries from the treasure trove of Biblical, literary and psychoanalytic exegesis” (96).

This thesis will endeavor to describe how the genre is also reflective of literary tropes generated during the European pre-colonial encounter with the Americas, during which representatives from the Old World, seeking to expand imperial interests in the world, engaged in a myth-making process that allowed them to interpret the lands and
peoples of the New World. Like the writings of the earliest explorers to their European 
readers back home, the post-apocalyptic narrative attempts to establish distinctive 
interpretations of hypothetical future worlds based on pre-existing categories accessible 
to audiences in the present. Recognizable are the patterns of materialism and expansion, 
as well as the establishment of fringe characters as Others, a philosophical designation 
first thematized by Hegel and developed in its contemporary contexts in the works of 
post-colonial critics Edward Said, Tzvetan Todorov, Stephen Greenblatt and others. 
Adding to the post-colonial perception of native Otherness are the works of 
anthropologist William Arens, whose controversial 1979 book *The Man-Eating Myth* 
challenges popular assumptions about the cannibal nature of numerous indigenous 
cultures, a belief that contributes more to the Western effort to subdue those cultures than 
to reach an understanding of them. In response to this important text follow a series of 
other theorists including Gananath Obeyesekere, Jerry Phillips, Nancy Kilgour and others 
who discuss the colonial representations of native cannibalism, as well as its modern 
extension as a metaphor for consumerism. Paul Williams, in an article on the genre in 
*Science Fiction Studies*, states that “the post-apocalyptic world can be an arena for the 
replaying of the colonial encounter, frightening in its unintelligibility but alluring in its 
virgin promise” (304).

Numerous post-apocalyptic texts populate a list of worthy reads, including 
Mary Shelley’s 1826 *The Last Man* and Jack London’s 1912 short story *The Scarlet 
Plague*, each of which details the destruction and reformation of civilization following a 
deadly disease outbreak. More recent novels like George R. Stewart’s 1949 *Earth Abides* 
revisit an apocalyptic vision in which mankind is nearly wiped out by a deadly disease
and forced to adapt to a world devoid of technology. Post-nuclear novels like Walter M. Miller’s *A Canticle for Liebowitz* and Neville Shute’s *On the Beach* explore a future world reeling from the devastation of nuclear war, reflecting Cold War anxieties about the potential for total world destruction. Narratives like those found in P.D. James’ *The Children of Men* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* imagine a world rendered too toxic for human conception of children. And finally, a gruesomely popular theme engendered in zombie films and novels such as George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and its subsequent incarnations, and Max Brooks’ *The Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, posits worlds that seem to embody all of our worst technological fears by creating a new kind of monster as a by-product of biological or nuclear engineering.

Close readings of the 2007 film *I Am Legend*, with additional commentary on Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel of the same name, and Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road* offer what seem to be representative, yet contrasting, views of “the end,” both of which reflect familiar encounter and post-apocalyptic literary tropes. While audiences of these narratives may expect certain features, however, both the filmmaker and novelist utilize the genre for the purpose of providing a stripped-down backdrop for pressing social statements. As a result each narrative in its own way confronts the conditions in our present time that have created the ruined worlds that distinguish them, encouraging audiences to interpret the post-apocalyptic narrative as a “what-is” rather than a “what-if” scenario.

Chapter II of this thesis will discuss the 2007 Warner Brothers film *I Am Legend*, which is set in the depopulated cityscape of New York following a deadly viral
outbreak. The protagonist, Robert Neville, is cast as the representative New World explorer who balances his enjoyment and consumption of the leavings of his vacant “new world” with his efforts to colonize it, bringing into submission, via a cure for the disease, the demonized survivors of the plague – the new “natives” – who roam the dark streets nightly in search of him. The discussion of *I Am Legend* will focus on Neville’s contrasting identities as savior and conqueror and how his reliance on those identities precludes his ability to see clearly the truth of his encounter – that he is no longer at the center, but at the fringe. The position once occupied by humanity now rightfully belongs to the transformed monsters that are adapted to the realities of life after humankind. Audiences learn that Neville’s reliance on the old categories to define his world no longer applies, and that in reality, he is truly the Other.

Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* similarly establishes two unnamed protagonists at the center of the narrative, roaming along a highway in a burned post-apocalyptic America. The struggles of the two in the stark, irrevocably destroyed landscape illustrate the realities of a completely consumed world of mankind’s making as they journey to find hope in a world that offers them none. The man and his son encounter the expected features of the post-apocalyptic genre, only with none of its familiar bounty; rather, they experience a true and profound dearth of material for their survival, and become witness to the ultimate outcome of human consumption – cannibalism. McCarthy treads on the fringe of the post-apocalyptic genre to offer an unflinching glimpse of the horrific aftermath of the modern materials economy, in which the final commodity available to exploit is man himself. That Cormac McCarthy, a highly acclaimed favorite of literary critics, participates in this marginal subgenre of science
fiction – a genre generally considered unliterary – begs some critical recognition, as his handling of the familiar tropes serves to undo the genre, essentially creating a new one from the ashes of the old.

While an extensive body of criticism exists examining post-colonial literature and contact narratives, many of the most-learned and highly-respected commentators on these genres seem hesitant to conduct a serious discussion of anything related to science fiction. By connecting the post-apocalyptic genre to these critical discussions of what may be deemed by some as more worthy of their critical attentions, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate some of the merits of the genre. Each narrative offers to audiences an opportunity to engage the modern consumer fantasy, and yet also works to reveal the underlying heart of darkness within the modern preoccupation with materialism. By drawing parallels to pre-colonial approaches to the New World and its inhabitants, this thesis will highlight the continuing attachment of popular thought to literary tropes that have persisted since time immemorial.
CHAPTER II

THE NEW WORLD NARRATIVE OF

I AM LEGEND

In a film that is perhaps at the epicenter of a recent explosion in post-apocalyptic stories, *I Am Legend*, a popular retelling of Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel of the same name, explores many of the essential characteristics of the genre. In the film, American military virologist Robert Neville finds himself alone amidst a burgeoning population of bloodthirsty monsters that seem bent on his destruction. Neville’s solitude is attributed to his immunity to the destructive man-made Krippin Virus, a fictional, genetically-reengineered measles virus, originally designed to cure cancer, which has morphed into a highly pathogenic and deadly disease. Of the ten percent of the human population not immediately killed by the virus, nine percent exist in a highly aggressive, monstrous state that purportedly inspires them to seek to feed on the other one percent of the population that are “immune” to the virus. In the seemingly impossible heroic role of frontier savior, Neville alone appears capable of finding a cure for the swarming hordes of the infected human remnants of New York City. Thus, set against the iconic backdrop of a not-so-futuristic American city, destroyed by yet another of man’s corrupted technological breakthroughs, audiences are drawn into a now-familiar narrative trope. Simultaneously attracted to and repelled by a ruined post-modern world teeming with savage creatures that threaten the last vestige of civilization, we are invited to identify
with Neville, humanity’s last chance. Like a pre-Conquest explorer, Neville becomes the model of contemporary consumer culture as he engages the fantasy-nightmare of the New World of the post-apocalyptic imagination.

In this popular, post-apocalyptic film, the new combines with the familiar in a chilling narrative that mimics European pre-colonial encounter writings. Like many of the missives and travel diaries recorded by the earliest explorers of the New World, Robert Neville’s chronicles of his encounters in the imagined contact zone – a ruined modern city filled with strange, terrifying inhabitants – are reminiscent of “old world” tropes. Like the scores of pre-colonial letters written by explorers for their European audiences, Neville’s record reflects the film director’s answer to the type of encounter narrative desired by modern audiences. Within this narrative, audiences find that in the absence of any real frontiers in our time, they can instead be invented. In maintaining the several functions of their historical counterparts, the stories satisfy crucial elements of the pre-colonial consumer fantasy, including the promise of vast material wealth, negligible competition for resources, and ironically, “native” inhabitants with whom the protagonist must engage in an often violent negotiation for those resources, firmly establishing the rightness of the colonizer’s claim to them.

Paramount to audiences’ understanding of the situation in the narrative is that the encounter, as it is experienced by the protagonist, is one in which the identity of the Other must be irrefutably established. A post-colonial definition of Othering is perhaps best described by Tzvetan Todorov in his *Conquest of America*, where he states that,

> What is denied [of the natives of the New World] is the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself. These two elementary figures of the experience of alterity are both
grounded in egocentrism, in the identification of our own values with values in general, of our I with the universe – in the conviction that the world is one. (42)

Egocentrism allows the natives of the New World, therefore, to be viewed not as subjects with their own humanity, but as objects, devoid of humanity. Neville, in order to retain a heroic identity, must establish the infected creatures as beings diametrically-opposed to him, an inhuman force against which his struggle is justified. By establishing this opposition, audiences can rest in the assurance that those Others, being altered beyond any semblance of humanity, are in fact an obstacle to the otherwise perfect consumer fantasy in which Neville is immersed. Neville’s, and by association his audience’s, enjoyment of a world of freely obtainable abundance is only interrupted by the presence of these other occupants.

Although once human, the creatures of *I Am Legend* bear only marginal resemblance to Neville, and consequently to the audience itself. By establishing for the audience a clear distinction between the protagonist and his rival, the narrative reinforces classic representations of the Other as individuals lacking characteristics of the dominant “in” group. This “we” versus “they” paradigm establishes the perceived necessity for the often brutal and inhumane treatment of the new “natives” of this harsh post-modern “contact zone,” a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*, which

. . . refers to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (6)

Of course, the justification for Neville’s hostility is initially clear. The creatures that roam the streets during the dark hours of night are believed to be man-eaters, or in Matheson’s original text, vampires. Audiences’ well-practiced discernment
of this fantasy trope can easily lead them to the appropriate expectations, a fact that the filmmaker exploits. No sympathy is required of audiences toward flesh-eating vampiric monsters, whose every behavior is sinister and terrifying. What is established early in the film is a clearly identified villain in the form of what appears to be a mindless army of insatiable predators, bent on the destruction and consumption of the protagonist, Robert Neville – a man uniquely trained and motivated to repair what has become a global catastrophe of man’s making. Neville is cast as a lone warrior who feverishly expends every waking moment in the self-sacrificial employment of finding a cure for the infection. Despite his occupation in this task, however, Neville, in fulfillment of the post-apocalyptic consumer fantasy, spends much of his time in other recreational pursuits.

*I Am Legend* references many of the familiar post-apocalyptic tropes – an all but exterminated human population, a ruined landscape filled with the decaying remains of civilization, and what is arguably one of the most appealing traits of the post-apocalyptic world, free access to everything that existed before the end of civilization without competition or a need for money, an unlimited surplus of commodities available to the protagonist for his continued survival. Neville is the New World explorer, arrived in the Promised Land to unlock her secrets and acquire her treasures. He is privileged with access to a newly purified earth with all of its riches – the fertile, unoccupied soil of New York’s Central Park provides fields in which he grows and harvests corn and other vegetables; abandoned gas stations display inflated fuel prices which he will never again need to pay; empty grocery stores and abandoned apartments provide canned and packaged foods, medicines, clothing and sundries; and generators ingeniously strewn about his exquisite Washington Square home allow him to live in much the same way as
he might have done before the catastrophe. He possesses an abundance of material treasures, which the filmmaker is compelled to exhibit: state-of-the-art equipment in his basement laboratory, including conspicuously displayed Macintosh computers on which he saves video journals of his research; a brand new, bright red Ford Mustang, which he races through the vacant streets of New York, engine roaring, hunting for deer; abundant firearms and ammunition; and a stunning collection of what would appear to be original artwork displayed in his home, which includes Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and other priceless pieces. Incidentally, all of the vehicles driven by Neville in *I Am Legend* are Fords: the above mentioned Shelby GT500, an Expedition, and an Escape. The names of the latter vehicles are certainly suggestive of the contact literature quality of the narrative, marking Neville as a sort of frontiersman on the borders of the howling wilderness. Such marketing seems necessary in an era of mass-marketed film with multi-million dollar budgets. *I Am Legend* was produced with a budget of $150 million (“I Am Legend (Film)”), much of which was made available through brand recognition within the film’s already highly recognizable sets. In all of these trappings, the film suggests that Neville’s life, although devoid of any human companionship, bears the description of the modern consumer fantasy and the fulfillment of what was ultimately the goal of all European imperial endeavors.

And yet this lavish material abundance comes at a high cost. Like the explorers of the New World, whose enjoyment and consumption of its riches must have been blunted by their longing for home and family, Neville’s loneliness and distance from his old, pre-epidemic civilization and his idyllic family, destroyed in the early stages of the outbreak, is mitigated only by these abundant material comforts. Audiences
can easily sympathize with Neville’s predicament, and his noble nature, when viewing, in a series of flashbacks and dream sequences, the progression of the epidemic, which includes a mass exodus from the island of Manhattan during which his wife and daughter perish in the helicopter meant to deliver them from harm. Neville’s disposition toward the infected creatures reflects a justifiable bitterness of loss and failure with which audiences can commiserate. And yet, these memories and dream sequences may reveal other possible motives behind Neville’s fervent efforts to correct the situation, some of which reveal a less becoming aspect to the protagonist.

In one such dream sequence depicting their frantic drive by military escort to the evacuation zone, a tense discussion between Neville and his wife reveal his commitment, and perhaps a sense of personal moral responsibility to stay in the city. Neville’s wife, seeking the reasons behind their terrifying flight, asks, almost accusingly, “Did it [the virus] jump? Is it airborne?” to which Neville replies, hesitatingly, as if coping with the import of such powerful knowledge, “It may be” (I Am Legend). Later in the discussion, when his wife asks what he is doing and why he will not accompany them to a refuge outside the city, he incredulously responds – “What am I doing? I’m not gonna let this happen” (I Am Legend). Neville repels, as a means of saving humanity, the idea of embracing a conventional escape in his family for a more confrontational approach, one which definitively establishes his role as a heroic conqueror.

Neville’s ardor for seeking a solution would indicate, at least initially, his passionate desire to save humanity at all costs. And yet, his role as a military virologist hints at another possible contributing factor in his fervor, as revealed in his comment: “The window’s still open. If we find something in a week, or two weeks, we can reverse
the spread [of the virus]. I can still fix this” (*I Am Legend*). This is later reinforced in a discussion with Anna, a survivor who miraculously appears to save Neville from a group attack by the monsters, in which he echoes, “This is ground zero. This is my site. I’m not gonna let this happen. I can still fix this” (*I Am Legend*). To what extent is Neville, the military scientist, himself culpable in the creation of the malevolent plague that has thrust his family, as well as his beloved city, into chaos? While he may not be directly responsible for the botched vaccine-turned-killer virus, people like him are. Is Neville, to some degree, motivated by his own guilt at having participated in the genesis of such a malignant biological agent that has wrench itself irrevocably from his control? Neville’s repetition of the possessive phrase – “this is my site” – certainly seems to suggest more than simple male hubris, indicating rather, perhaps, his recognition of the role he, and people like him, might have played in its inception. It also suggests a possible need for the protagonist to somehow assuage his guilt at having contributed to the tragedy. Like the pre-Conquest explorers, who continued to inhabit the lands they did not rightfully own, Neville stakes a claim in a city whose proper inhabitants may actually be the infected ones. He remains in the city, rather than accompanying his wife and daughter, in an effort to maintain human occupation there, when it may in fact be that the lands he is attempting to occupy have become the native lands of the vampires.

Like Columbus, the borders that identify Neville in the role of hero continue to blur with time, as audiences tensely observe Neville’s encounters with the frightening creatures that populate the dark places of the city, referred to later in the film as “Darkseekers.” Like the natives of the New World encountered by Columbus, the Darkseekers are subtly revealed not to perhaps live in a “howling wilderness” with no
order, but in an organized society, holding to different values and social structures than
the world Neville represents. Signs begin to emerge that contradict Neville’s assessment
of his enemy, none of which, due to their Otherness, allow Neville or his audience to
empathize with their plight.

In one tense encounter, during a frantic search for his dog in a pitch black
bank building containing a “hive” of infected Darkseekers, audiences observe, with
Neville, that the creatures live not in isolation, but in community with each other,
spending the daylight hours sleeping indoors, concealed from the harmful ultraviolet rays
of the sun. This vulnerability to light is revealed in an exaggerated post-modern extension
of modern environmental concerns, as the creatures are revealed by science to be
incapable of withstanding the natural conditions into which they are birthed. This
sensitivity is demonstrated clinically during Neville’s medical vaccine “trials” on an
infected vampire, in which he endeavors to infuse his (ironically) rare viral immunity into
a female host in hopes of finding a cure for the infection. In the interest of scientific
integrity, Neville begins his trial by first confirming that the “patient” is, in fact, infected,
beginning with the passage of an ultraviolet lamp over her skin, which bubbles and burns
under its radiation. Neville’s methodology is systematic, unemotional and focused
entirely on a scientific process, making no consideration as to the potentially human
status of the vampire test subject. Despite initial indications that the female Darkseeker
may possess some form of humanity, Neville is unable to fit the concept around his
preexisting belief in what she is. Any evidence to the contrary is either avoided or
ignored in favor of staying the existing course in an effort to “fix” the problem.
Like native Americans in the pre-colonial encounter, the vampire becomes an *object* in the justifiable clinical experimentation process. No presumption of humanity is suggested. The infected individual is now a lab animal, devoid of any need for gentleness or courtesy, an Other completely alien to Neville, unworthy of humane treatment, being in fact a biological vessel, containing the answer to the problem he is trying to solve. The solution is less about curing the monsters than it is about Neville succeeding. Again Neville is subtly appearing to his audiences the detached clinician, incapable of nurturing the patient-object, bent only on the examination and testing processes themselves. During his examination of the infected woman, Neville speaks unemotionally into a microphone, which records his observations, while simultaneously vocalizing them to the audience.

Okay. Subject is female. Likely 18 to 20 years of age. Dilaudid push only sedates effectively at six times human dose. Core temperature 106 Fahrenheit. Pulse 200 bpm. Respiration elevated. PA O₂, 300% of normal. Pupils fully dilated. Non-reactive to light. Extreme reaction to UV exposure. Symptoms and tissue samples confirm that subject is infected with KV. (*I Am Legend*)

His observations reflect his comparison of the test subject to himself, a “normal” human being. The evidence gathered from his investigation serves simply to perpetuate the nonhuman status of the patient; a sedative capable of working on her is only able to do so at “six times human dose,” indicating that she is in fact not human – which ultimately leads Neville to justify his consumption of innumerable creatures for his fatal clinical vaccine trials.

To further illustrate Neville’s detachment from his specimen, viewers are shown in the background, lining the wall of his basement laboratory like hunting trophies, innumerable photographs – gruesome headshots of his many failed attempts to cure the victims of this dreaded plague. Many of these photos bear recognizable facial
expressions that hearken back to their previous human identities – fear, sadness, even surprise. Neville, as the New World would-be conqueror, is incapable of recognizing these facial expressions; his focus is entirely inward.

Guilt over his previous failure to prevent the horrible outbreak that created the monsters is further exacerbated by his egocentric race to convert them back into beings who exhibit more “typical human behavior” – in effect, civilizing them. This is reminiscent of the New World explorers who, in failing to view indigenous Americans as human, acted on a perceived authority to “humanize” them by forcing them to adopt European dress, language, and religion. The methods he uses to pursue this aim reflect Neville’s pre-catastrophe ideologies that created the problem. He is unable to view the new natives of this created world any differently, being irreversibly immersed in the materialism and consumer mentality of the world before the apocalypse. He sees them only as a problem to be solved or an error to be reversed, rather than the inevitable advancement of man into a super-consumer that may actually represent his next logical evolutionary stage. In this ironic, almost unthinkable, turnaround, the Other, in opposition to the colonizing force of the modern world, becomes the dominant culture, a product of the consuming drives of the pre-apocalyptic – that is, modern – man. Such a view would, however unfortunate for Neville and his audience, serve to humanize the Other in the film, calling into question the heroism of the protagonist and, by association, the biases of the audience. Admitting to their humanity would unequivocally identify the hero as a villain, throwing into question the real motivation behind Neville’s insistence on “curing” the “victims” of the infection. Are they in actuality the rightful owners of New York
City’s bountiful post-humanity materials economy – the logical outcome of our modern consumer appetites?

This potential for the native’s rightful claim to land echoes the pre-colonial encounter dilemma. The natives of the New World, having occupied its vast lands for thousands of years prior to Europe’s arrival, can be argued to have been the proper owners of the American lands, and in fact, the most adapted to surviving in the wilderness; and yet, despite what would seem obvious, European conquerors effectively blotted out the glaring evidence of the human status of the indigenes for the sake of acquiring that wilderness. Driven by immeasurable greed for the wealth contained in the New World, it is unsurprising that explorers’ efforts to dehumanize the peoples of the Americas were among the first words written about them. The fact that they were relatively easy to subdue certainly provided further justification for the perception that they were in fact worthy of being conquered and colonized. Primary to this perception was the belief that the inhabitants of the New World were savages, devoid of civilization and its immediately recognizable trappings, such as a comprehensible language, a Christian religious morality, and a consumer-driven economic system. Natives, to the European eye, appeared to have no culture: they did not appear to cultivate crops, had no recognizable cities, and engaged in social practices completely foreign or, in the European perspective, barbaric. The lands, emptied of any “human” life, must necessarily belong to the one who “discovers” it. The inhabitants occupying that land, and thereby potentially deserving of it, must necessarily be viewed as savage, severely lacking, and desperately in need of the purifying force of European influence to save them from savagery.
Such interpretation of native cultures as savage requires that observation matches preconceived assumptions about groups that do not fit the description of the “in” group. For European explorers, that meant any peoples lacking the identifying characteristics of European culture; for the post-apocalyptic protagonist, it means nightmarish creatures wrought from the pre-apocalyptic scientific imagination. Thus in skewed reports of native behaviors, practices, and communications, both protagonists address audience expectations and existing beliefs. For instance, non-verbal language and the use of signs, which is the predominant mode of expression utilized to represent the intentions of Europeans and natives alike, often involve miscommunication and outright fallacy. Columbus’s observation of a tribal outcry is mistakenly interpreted as praise, when in fact it is a warning to leave immediately (Todorov 32). The Explorers’ failure, or refusal, to correctly interpret native signs leads to rampant hyperbole and conjecture about the native mind, and ultimately serves to promote European colonial interests in the New World. The story is the same within the narrative context of *I Am Legend*.

Neville’s interaction with the infected residents of his beloved, albeit transformed, New York City bears striking resemblance to these pre-colonial interactions. As a virtual pioneer and the only known remaining member of the preceding civilization, Neville approaches the infected population as mysterious “natives,” who possess chronologically inverse sleep patterns, presumably cannibalistic eating habits, and, aside from meticulously engineered and terrifying movie studio roars, no apparent language. He makes no attempt to understand the potentially new culture that is being displayed by their behaviors. His interpretation of their Otherness is guided by assumptions about “typical” human behavior, since their behavior is so clearly different than his (and our)
own. These assumptions are displayed with astounding clarity as Neville reports, presumably for an unknown posterity, into his video log following his initial encounter with the leader of the vampires.

A behavioral note... an infected male exposed himself to sunlight today. Now, it’s possible decreased brain function, or growing scarcity of food is causing them to ignore their basic survival instincts. Social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent. *(I Am Legend)*

Ostensibly, Neville’s main fear, although unstated, appears to be that of being eaten by the infected. His fear is based upon characteristics of the infected which are implied in the subtext of the film but never witnessed by audiences, which is ironically reminiscent of early pre-colonial fears that were perpetuated in the telling of native eating practices in the New World. Reports of cannibalism in the pre-colonial Americas and other European contact zones, as well as the persisting myth of cannibalism, abounded, revealing an imaginative narrative, peopled with savage humans engaging in every sort of flesh-eating practice. Columbus himself references numerous accounts of cannibal feasts in which natives dined upon anyone from enemy captives to recently deceased relatives. Cortes’ accounts of his dealings with the Aztecs and the native communities surrounding Tenochtitlan detail human sacrifice and subsequent cannibal events and the ensuing acts of native salvation taken by the conquistador and his army.

And yet, despite the prevalence of such reports by explorers, anthropologists, and other scientists in the years following initial contact, actual cannibalism has proven to be extremely difficult to verify, and seems to be based on a collective desire for a mythology of cannibalism, rather than any real practice of it. According to William Arens, in his controversial work *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and*
Anthropophagy, no first hand observations of customary cannibalism can be produced, despite volumes of study on the subject. In its many forms, the documentation of man-eating in the history of European contact with native cultures is remarkably devoid of empirical evidence, and relies solely upon the second- and third-hand accounts of writers largely untrained in the skill of scientific observation and reporting. Therefore, the question of whether or not cannibalism exists, according to Arens, becomes a “moot” point and less interesting than the fact that the idea of cannibalism is commonly accepted as a fact without adequate documentation (Man-Eating Myth 9).

Cannibalism exists as a concept and a source of human fascination, rather than an observable fact, yet has become a trait universally ascribed to native cultures worldwide. Such conclusions require “a substantial amount of scientism and ethnocentrism … to arrive at this position” (Arens, Man-Eating Myth 21). This fascination is the object of audiences worldwide, and continues to occupy the fancy of the human psyche, revealing a desire to both believe in the myth of cannibal consumption and to somehow experience this most taboo of human behaviors. In the mind of the explorer and the modern cannibal audience, the cannibal fantasy remains a primal subconscious desire,

... riveting the viewer’s attention on something which is prohibited but nonetheless fascinating to consider. Such a scene [of familial cannibalism] implies total human freedom by depicting the absence of the strongest and most elementary social constraints, which include the prohibition on human flesh. (Man-Eating Myth 147)

Thus the assumptions about the Other thrust forward from history into our post-apocalyptic imaginings, into an unknown New World where the familiar traits of pre-civilized humans linger to horrify, and therefore justify, audiences’ appreciation for
the equally savage reactions of our protagonists. In a world conceived by the darkest
discoveries and miscalculations of mankind, we are forced to encounter a world of our
own making and the savage Other who lives there. The question remains, though none
can adequately answer it: who truly belongs in this New World? This question has an
obvious answer to Neville, whose sole interaction with the infected residents of New
York is either to destroy or to cure them. He is able only to view them as objects. And
despite their previous human status, their current form can never rise to that level again
without his help.

Despite Neville’s efforts to maintain scientific objectivity, particularly as it
pertains to his clinical trials on the infected, he fails to see what becomes increasingly
obvious to audiences. As his contact with the new natives of New York intensifies, he
proceeds to misinterpret the aggressive response of one vampire, whom audiences almost
immediately perceive to be the leader, following Neville’s capture of the female trial
subject mentioned earlier. In a terrifying scene, this leader, in pursuit of his trapped peer,
exits his dark hiding place into the sunlight, roaring in challenge at Neville. In his later
reflections on the leader’s seemingly uncharacteristic behavior, Neville concludes that
that behavior is the result of “social de-evolution” and evidence that “typical human
behavior is now totally absent” (I Am Legend). In the development of the narrative,
however, the audience is able to perceive that this behavior may in fact be evidence of
advancement in human behavior, as the male who exposes himself to the deadly sunlight
does so in defense of his group mate.¹ Neville, in characteristically egocentric fashion, attributes the risk taken by the leader to “possible decreased brain function, or growing scarcity of food.” Neville is unable to imagine any other alternative. He is, in his own mind as well as in that of the audience, the center of this narrative.

At this point in the film, a caustically antagonistic relationship between the lead vampire and Neville is established. Now, rather than a mass of unidentified enemies, Neville has one specific antagonist, who is revealed as having greater intelligence than initially assumed. Neville, fooled into a sense of security by the apparent lack of forethought of his enemy, and by his ability to avoid capture, succumbs to a decoy placed by that very enemy. In the development of a subplot, some of Neville’s daylight hours are spent interacting with a collection of department store mannequins, most of whom he has placed in a video store, presumably as a method of coping with his human isolation. During one of his routine scouting trips through the city, however, Neville discovers that one of his mannequin friends has been moved. Neville, responding in panic and paranoia, shoots the mannequin “Fred” and upon approaching to investigate, becomes ensnared in the same type of booby trap he had used to capture his lab subject. This scene, in addition to intensifying the complication of the movie’s plot, reveals Neville’s mistaken impressions of his adversary. Instead of being an ignorant savage – an animal having abandoned all signs of “typical human behavior” – the vampire, at the approach of sunset, approaches from within a darkened building, with three infected dogs in leash, which subsequently attack him. In the process, Neville’s faithful companion – a dog named Sam

¹ Tellingly, the final release of the film excluded a scene that I will describe later – an alternative ending that fully develops the relationship between the lead vampire and his captured mate, the test subject.
is bitten and infected, leading Neville to be forced to euthanize her, preventing her turning into a vampiric dog and forcing Neville to an even greater depth of isolation. This devastating loss pushes Neville into a suicidal confrontation with the creatures that results in his rescue by Anna, who inadvertently leads the vampires to Neville’s secret home.

None of this leads Neville, or his audience, into any new conclusions about the monsters, other than those which had already been established. The negative perceptions continue to accumulate. The creatures are violent, predatory, and now, diabolically clever, particularly in regards to finding and destroying Neville. In fact, once discovering Neville’s formerly hidden residence, they amass a seemingly unlimited force to extract him, presumably to eat him and his new companions. All signs lead to one conclusion: the monsters must be cured or destroyed and Neville alone remains the only one capable of accomplishing that feat.

The concluding scenes have the protagonist, Anna, and a little boy whom she had rescued before entering the story, barricaded inside Neville’s laboratory, awaiting what can only be described as the final assault, the narrative endgame. Simultaneously, Neville realizes that his latest lab subject is in fact showing signs of improvement, intimating that the “cure” has been found – and at the most inopportune moment possible. During the intensely violent attack by a number of the infected monsters, the leader enters, throwing aside his cohorts to take over the attack by ramming his entire body and head into the Plexiglas door separating them from Neville. Desperately, and in what becomes a ridiculously impossible situation, Neville, aiming his pistol, yells through a damaged Plexiglas door, “I can save you. You are sick, and I can help you. I can save all of you.” Neville’s “mission” has been realized, but too late. His advanced knowledge of
medical technology and an egocentric self-perception as a “typical” human with “saving powers,” Neville is finally forced into recognizing for the first time what is truly happening.

Like Columbus and his counterparts, Neville is driven to action by the encounter, horrified by the differentness of the Other, confident in his misinterpretation of signs, and certain of his correctness, much of which is influenced by religious conviction. In fact, in his last action in the final release of the film, his interpretation of signs coalesces to suggest divine portents. In an earlier scene, co-survivor Anna\(^2\), who had appeared suddenly and fortuitously, rescuing Neville from imminent consumption by the vampire leader, had informed him that her search for a survivor camp in Vermont, interrupted by her stop in now-vacant New York City, was inspired by God Himself, a claim that Neville angrily refutes. However, during this final encounter with the vampires, where they have tracked him to his basement laboratory, Neville conviction falters as he begins to correctly interpret signs. The butterfly, a symbol that has been repeated in a variety of scenes throughout the film, now appears starkly in the shattered safety glass, overlaid on the image of the attacking vampire in the background. Stunned, he turns to Anna, who is desperately holding and rocking the little boy, to see a butterfly tattoo on her neck. The film’s soundtrack is muted, silencing the attack and allowing audiences to hear the remembered voice of Neville’s little girl saying, “Daddy, look at the butterfly,” a phrase foreshadowed in one of his dream sequences of his family’s failed

\(^2\) Played by Alice Braga, this character occupies the quite different role of Matheson’s female vampire seductress, Ruth.
flight from the city. As a symbol of new life, or perhaps resurrection, the butterfly image sparks a mind-shattering revelation in the protagonist, changing the course of his actions.

Neville seems to see the pieces of an intricate puzzle fall into place. In the major film release, his subsequent act is to collide into the advancing enemy with a live grenade, resulting not only in the death of his violent adversary, but his own death. This somewhat formulaic conclusion renders Neville a legend, explaining not only the title of the film, but further justifying and ennobling his otherwise hostile demeanor toward those characters he has presumably desired to “save.” In this explosive ending, self-sacrificial, Neville’s indeed Christ-like death, allows Anna to escape with the vaccine, and with it, the enduring hope for the human race. His death is therefore not in vain, as humanity is able to endure, as is Neville’s reputation as a hero. Audiences are led to believe that somehow, with time, humanity will again be restored, and that its perseverance and industriousness will be rewarded, however chastened. The idea is communicated that regardless of the struggle, humanity will deservedly prevail. Here again, however, the story of the Other is unwritten.

And yet, the existence of an alternate ending, referenced earlier in this chapter is illuminating, and gives adequate reason for discussion of the filmmakers’ message about the encounter. The decision to end the film with Neville’s sacrificial death is contrasted abruptly with this decidedly gentler and more equitable alternative. In this ending, which appears on and on the special collector’s edition DVD version of the film and on various websites, Neville’s retreat into his laboratory for the final conflict concludes in a decidedly different revelation. This revelation is arguably more consistent with the story’s development than the major release version.
In this scene, Neville, temporarily barricaded behind his Plexiglas laboratory door, experiences an epiphany as a number of “native signs” coalesce, revealing that the true source of the vampire leader’s hostility is the fact that he has taken his mate captive. The butterfly that appears in the cracks of the door is followed by a pause in the attack during which the vampire smears with his hands a crude Rorschach-esque image onto the glass before Neville’s eyes. This resurrection symbol, recurrent throughout the film, suddenly takes form in the mind of the protagonist, at which point he dramatically alters his approach to the savage Other before him. Rather than flinging himself into the arms of death and martyrdom, Neville puts down his weapon, opens the glass doors – ironically under the protection of the vampire, who growls at his followers as they approach to attack Neville – and releases his patient. He almost ceremonially extracts the intravenous tubes that have been keeping her sedated, and stands, fully humbled with his head bowed in a posture of submission. What follows is a jarring scene of tenderness as the monster from whom Neville has been fleeing, and whom he has been attempting to cure (or destroy), picks up his mate, exchanging unintelligible moans and growls of what can only be described as love. The scene concludes as the vampires leave Neville, Anna, and the boy in peace. This is a radical shift in perception about the inhuman status of the vampires in *I Am Legend*, but more significantly that of the Other. It suggests a radical shift in audiences perceptions about the Other as well, recognizing that as Neville is in fact an Other to the vampires, so are we to the others whom we encounter.

Neville, filmed in the foreground of his macabre backdrop of trophy-dead photographs and medical instruments, is finally able to correctly interpret the signs of these new natives of this New World. Rather than ending in a violent clash of destruction
and death typical of the encounter with the Other, and in a radical departure from the plot of either the novel or its subsequent film complements, the director proposes important lessons, decidedly post-modern in nature, to be learned about encountering the Other. The first is that we, being egocentric, can never fully sympathize with the identity-realities of the Other – its culture, language, behaviors, diet, or dress. It is wholly different in deeply intimate ways that can only be understood by itself in its own context, and never by outsiders. Second, and in an uncharacteristically optimistic twist, audiences are shown that confronting the Other can yield different results than our history has shown, when we decide to enter the encounter experience “listenin,’” as Neville does in this alternate ending, with a clearer understanding that “we” are also “other.” In this diplomatic scenario, no one must be destroyed, and participants can part company with their respective identities, and bodies, intact.

Ultimately, however, the filmmakers’ commercially safe decision to violently put to death both the vampire and Neville – Other and Self – in the final release of the film reflects, perhaps as did the explorers’ missives, the audiences’ hunger for the sensational – the catharsis of total destruction – that provides definitive closure and punishment of the Other and decisive martyrdom for the hero, and ultimate regeneration for the whole of humanity. This dismissal of the more risky and ambiguous diplomatic routes firmly establishes the boundary between “we” and “they” and paves the way for the novel to once again colonize a New World, eliminating the need to think and act creatively about the lands, and narratives, that we explore. Humanity is free to continue on its present course, albeit drastically reduced in number (for the time being), until we
can rebuild, repopulate, and reclaim a future for ourselves that is once and for all completely free from the Other.

This conclusion seems to suggest that, while a crashing end to our modern consumer trajectory seems imminent, the reward will actually be a continuation of the consumer drives that motivate modern life. Neville’s direct or indirect participation in the inception of a deadly, population-reducing virus in essence assures his access to the material bounty of the world. The last man, he is free to enjoy what everyone seems to want, complete access to everything; however, this freedom, like that of the European conquerors, requires a negotiation with the Other, who threatens to limit access to those otherwise free resources.

Like the modern consumer, Neville’s actions seem to reflect our resistance to acting and thinking differently about our attitudes and appetites; rather, his actions encourage the modern consumer to fantasize a world in which there are fewer people, more material abundance, and a moral significance that will justify the continuance of our modern way of life. The solution to unabated greed and gluttony is more greed and gluttony with less competition for resources. The true inhumanity of this perspective is that in order to preserve for ourselves a heaping share of the world’s resources, a decisive victory over any competition for those resources will be necessary. In the end, consumerism as a way of life proves itself antihuman as it depends on others not having access to the material wealth available to the self.
CHAPTER III
CONSUMERISM AND CANNIBALS IN MCCARTHY’S THE ROAD

Post-apocalyptic literature has acquired, by time and practice, characteristics that define it as a genre. The masses of books populating this genre have essentially created an audience of consumers who come to the narratives in expectation of the established generic conventions. In the literary marketplace, satisfying a potential audiences’ appetite for these textual elements would seem to be a necessity, as form follows a certain capitalist function. In other words, the post-apocalyptic subgenre of science fiction novels is, like many popular literary forms, largely consumer-driven, and as such, must meet consumers’ needs by providing these narrative elements.

Readers of this genre typically expect to be immersed in a decimated, but still somewhat intact earth, nearly devoid of human inhabitants, yet often abundantly provisioned in other ways. The fertile consumer fantasy is cultivated in the standard post-apocalyptic narrative, where vacant grocery stores are fully stocked with no lines, waiting, or necessity for money. Expensive cars, posh houses, and plentiful modern material treasures are available with no competition or limitation to prevent its acquisition. And to complete the picture, the story is populated by “good guys” and “bad guys,” each of whom serve the structure of the narrative, and satisfy consumers’ appetites for the familiar motifs. As readers enter the narrative, they can reasonably expect
satisfaction from these formulaic structures. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, however, manipulates this genre, diverging dramatically from its formula, creating narrative tension by both fulfilling and depriving readers of the expectations of genre that motivate their consumption of the narrative itself. In so doing, McCarthy effectively turns the genre against readers, delivering striking messages about the primal drives of man, the persistent tension between morality and self-preservation, and the horrifying extremes of man’s obsessive preoccupation with consumption.

At the outset of the narrative, *The Road* promises to deliver what appears to be a familiar post-apocalyptic setting: two characters – “each the other’s world entire” (McCarthy 6) – are cast on a road to an unknown destination. Devoid of any other identifying names, the father and son pair is placed amidst a charred landscape in the somewhat distant aftermath of an unnamed global cataclysm. In what Ron Rosenbaum’s *Slate* article calls “nuke porn,” readers’ anticipation of the narrative features of the genre simulate “the techniques one could find in conventional porn: the excitement of arousal and buildup, the finger on the trigger as the world was brought to the trembling brink of a consciousness-obliterating climax” (1), where the ultimate outcomes satisfy readers’ needs of the genre. Interestingly, however, unlike many post-apocalyptic worlds which begin immediately before or during a global crisis, allowing audiences to witness the climactic end of civilization as it is known, *The Road*’s narrative begins untold years after a the disaster has befallen the earth and its inhabitants, thereby denying readers the voyeuristic satisfaction of witnessing the climax of disaster itself. Readers are instead inserted into an ongoing narrative, during the advanced aftermath of the tragedy that we
are left only to imagine – what Rosenbaum’s porn analogy labels the “post-coital tristesse.”

The only clue offered as to the nature of the demise of civilization is given in a short passage, in which we see “the clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions … A dull rose glow in the windowglass” (McCarthy 52). Rather than supplying readers with the expected progression of the disaster that they have become familiar with, McCarthy offers almost nothing to satisfy readers’ genre expectations. The narrative, while privately destroying the earth in partial fulfillment of the genre, also destroys the world of expectations that readers bring to the genre; in effect, McCarthy kills the old genre and invents a new one on its smoking foundations, enabling him to achieve a new result. In this way, the narrative is able to address a theme deeply embedded at the core of the post-apocalyptic genre, but rarely acknowledged. The reasons and specific causes for the earth’s destruction become irrelevant as the survival of the moment becomes the central conflict on which the narrative is focused. The man and boy are survivors not only of the cataclysm that destroyed the world, but of the lingering aftermath of that destruction, left to decipher its meaning. The man is forced to strip away all vestiges of his life from before the disaster; the boy, born afterwards, is in possession of nothing from that time, knowing only the present reality of earth, the road itself, and the pre-catastrophe lore of his father’s stories. They, along with their readers, are far removed from many of the significant elements of the post-apocalyptic genre, and none of its characteristic material bounty.

The setting of The Road situates the earth in an advanced state of decay; the sky is darkened with ash, resembling frightening Cold War era descriptions of a nuclear
winter – a continuous overcast with frequent rain and the persistent absence of the sun. Aside from the few human beings that appear along the road, gone are all traces of any living thing. All that remains of nature are the charred trunks of trees, withered grasses that disintegrate into ash at the touch, and rivers heavy-laden with ash. The profusely scattered remains of the dead in varying states of decay litter the road and cities, punctuating the pair’s journey with untold tales of death. This environment no longer yields anything for humanity who has, it can be argued, essentially exhausted it beyond recovery. Man has now only the destroyed environment with which he has lost the necessary means to interact productively and the dwindling leftovers of his manufactured goods from the previous time for which he must forage and scavenge. Again McCarthy departs from the readers’ expectations of the post-apocalyptic genre, depriving them of the typical abundance found by survivors of the apocalyptic event.

McCarthy’s vision of the absolute desolation of the earth is a significant departure from the common prophetic scene of the apocalypse, in which only man and his civilization are destroyed by his own rampant consumption rather than the whole earth’s natural environment. George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* and Neville Shute’s *On the Beach*, arguably both forerunners in the post-apocalyptic genre, are principal examples among a legion of commonly recited narratives of a renewed post-apocalyptic Earth in which the most significant deletion, or reduction, is the overwhelmingly destructive influence of mankind. The planet’s natural environment in these narratives, unlike that of *The Road*, experiences a profound renewal in man’s absence, returning to a kind of natural equilibrium, and providing, at least in the case of Stewart’s novel, a new abundance of natural resources, made available to the lingering humans who are able or
willing to take the pains to acquire it, possessing uniquely adapted qualities as survivors. Shute’s novel chronicles the survival of earth’s natural environment as witnessed by the dying remains of the human race, which are unable to enjoy a future in the irradiated post-nuclear environment and are instead forced to become extinct, aware of the enduring life of the planet they will vacate. These stories typically describe a kind of global cleansing, which significantly reduces the population, creating a narrative in which the environmental system has essentially been reset. Any remaining inhabitants are placed in these settings to fend for themselves – to repopulate or perish on nature’s terms.

In another strain of post-apocalyptic literature, mankind itself has reached the brink of extinction, rendering himself incapable of reproducing offspring due to the toxicity of the environment. P.D. James’ *The Children of Men* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* both chronicle humanity’s response to a future planet devoid of its presence, enabled by its absence to recover from the cataclysmic damage caused by human consumption. In either scenario, the significant reduction of humanity’s population enables the earth to renew itself.

In the expositions of these “renewal narratives,” nature’s abundance, while achieved at a costly toll to human life, is able to fulfill a modern consumer fantasy, in which earth’s natural resources and the abandoned leftovers of man’s manufactured goods become available to survivors. Competition for these items is nearly absent, as is any need to engage in any esoterically indirect means of employment to obtain them. Human activity is simplified and commerce is “restored” to a reformulated hunter-gatherer society, benefited by the acquired wisdom of a failed past; the remaining products from the pre-apocalyptic world provide time for its new citizens to learn how to
engage the natural world again. The choice to move beyond scavenging becomes one of the central conflicts in the narrative. And yet, man still has a means of continuing his consumerist behaviors, as only the means, not the ends, have been limited for the characters of the narratives. In short, the problem with the formulated worlds of the post-apocalyptic narrative seems to be that the human population of earth has become too large, and that that population is too far removed from nature to understand or acknowledge its negative impact on the environment. And yet, through a selective reduction of the human population, hope can be restored to the damaged, but not yet completely ruined, planet, and by extension, to the human race as well.

In contrast, McCarthy, in presenting a thoroughly devastated, burned world of human creation – one completely consumed by mankind – stops short of this merciful opportunity to rejuvenate it. In his inverted narrative, there are still too many people, warranting the destruction, but far too little of the natural world is actually left for them to continue to consume. The ruin is complete and irrevocable, providing no means of prospering from that end. The audience is denied the predictable cathartic binge – absolute license in a formerly restrictive consumer environment – and must instead witness a world where this has clearly already occurred many years before, exhausting even those remaining goods. The only remaining resources those that have been overlooked or those that had no prior value in the pre-apocalyptic world. Audiences must content themselves with their own imaginative recollections of the fantasy. Aside from a ready supply of burnable wood, created by vast forests filled with dead and burned trees, no significant material wealth can be realized. The world is the road, void of life, a
monument to its own death; humanity must finally do without, and as a result, its choices become fewer and of more profound significance.

McCarthy, by completely obliterating the world, destroys the genre that celebrates a world’s end, asking foundational questions about the nature of man. What happens when we have consumed absolutely everything? When all hope of material comfort and ease is stripped away, what fundamental choices do we have? How do we decide? How important is the decision? At what point will our morality supplant our consumerist ideologies, if ever? In asking the questions, readers are forced to contemplate the answers, some of which arguably carry with them grave conviction.

Aside from his primary goal of reaching the coast with the boy, the man is perpetually absorbed with the discouraging task of scouring the road and its immediate environs for food and useful items. Like ghosts of the dead past, he leads them from site to site, encounter to encounter, following the same “road” metaphorically that people had followed prior to the disaster. His materialistic search on the one hand appears necessary, as the physical needs of the pair can only be met by the acquisition of these provisions. And yet, his preoccupation often leads the pair into places that endanger them. His search leads him from one iconic location to another – his childhood home, random abandoned farmhouses, and stores – which he attempts to scour for anything useful. He finds, in most cases however, that these old monuments hold very little of value; and often, it is in these locations that they find the most danger. These old relics offer nothing more than empty promises and forebodings of peril, a fact which the boy seems to intuit, warning his father on numerous occasions of his fears at each location. These remnants from the past provide little fulfillment for them, nor for the audience, who may be expecting
similar outcomes as the man. It seems as though the narrative is reminding audiences of the emptiness of pursuing old modes of consumption – of old genres – and that nothing of real value can be gained there. The once generous environment of the post-apocalyptic genre can provide for its audience no new insights into the dismal world-realities that gave forth to its rise. Readers, denied the familiar tropes of the genre now deconstructed by McCarthy, must join him in its reinvention, and in so doing, give heed to its warnings.

The warnings in each of the physical locations visited by the father and son are further mirrored in the man’s memories of the time before the world was destroyed, the dreams of his dead wife, and his own distracting dreams about the past, where he is repeatedly confronted by his dead civilization and its former occupants. And yet of these “siren calls” he is more cautious. He clings to dreams and visions of danger and destruction, spurning the deceptive temptation of happy memories as a lure to death. According to the man, “. . . the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death” (18). In one such memory, for instance, the man recalls what he refers to as “the perfect day of his childhood…the day to shape the days upon” (13). Recalling a memory in which he and his uncle employed themselves with the extraction of tree trunks from a lakeshore, the man summons up a scene reminiscent of industry and consumption from the old world. “The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away,” but the man assists his uncle as he tears a remaining stump from the banks and tows it away with his boat, “puffing at his pipe” (13) in an image suggestive of an old steam tugboat, with its vigorous exhaust pipe pumping smoke into the air in the wake of its industrious toil. The scene suggests a perpetual, linear nature to the consumption of natural resources as the stumps of
previously felled trees, which have already been converted to smoke, are being revisited as a source of more consumption – of more smoke. In other words, this day of foraging from the man’s childhood mirrors the foraging in which he and his son are engaged, implying that the old ways perpetuate the old result – consumption begets consumption.

This memory, like so many of his pre-disaster era daydreams, is of no value in this consumed world, where nothing is left to extract. The values that guided the generations preceding his present existence have no value here, a message that is communicated in a variety of ways. The vision also mirrors the present situation of the father and son; the trees have already been removed by his uncle’s industrious predecessors, leaving only their stumps behind for them to extract and haul away. Like the vision, the man and boy are walking along a road, itself a symbol of commerce and industry, extracting anything possible remaining from the previous world. Along the way, they must continuously scavenge for supplies, left only with the sparse remains of what others before them have deemed inconsumable.

In one striking instance, the father and son reach a bridge upon which is jackknifed a semi-truck and trailer, perhaps the ultimate emblem of consumer culture in America. An abandoned semi-truck – the primary vehicle of consumerism – represents the generous promise of prosperous commerce in material goods. Swarming along every highway, the tractor-trailer is arguably the singular most visible element of the consumer chain of America’s materials economy. It is the vehicle that insures that products arrive safely and profusely in the hands of consumers; as such, it holds great promise for the starving pair walking along the road. However, as the man searches the truck, with the predictable motivation of stripping whatever resources it may contain, he is denied its
promise of riches. In the cab he finds nothing of use – “Papers in the floor. The glovebox was open but it was empty. . . a raw damp mattress on the bunk. There were drawers under the bunk and he pulled them out and looked through the trash” (45). Despite his hope in the old ways of providing for himself, he comes up empty-handed. Readers too, perhaps expecting some form of rescue from the once reliable supply mechanism embodied in a tractor-trailer on the freeway, are disappointed by the lack of comfort that this one provides to the protagonists.

Further investigation of the trailer yields not only a dearth of provisions, but what instead amounts to a tomb for innumerable corpses – “Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes” (47) – providing for McCarthy, perhaps, a mechanism for communicating the inevitable outcome of unchecked consumption. In the absence of any commodities for humans to transport and consume, what remains but the humans themselves? The man is faced with this reality repeatedly throughout the text in situations where a container promising sustenance is in reality a tomb emitting “that sour smell he’d come to know” (47). He later arrives at a grocery store, “rifled years ago” (79), where his search of a walk-in cooler, another symbol of the ease and abundance of a prosperous consumer marketplace, again yields “the sour rank smell of the dead” (81). Repeatedly, as the man and boy traverse the barren waste, they enter abandoned structures – a gas station, abandoned houses, storage sheds, and vehicles – rummaging for any resources that they might glean and finding only death and rot, dredging minute supplies of fuel from buried gas tanks, eating dirty, barely identifiable food, and transforming clothing and plastic tarps into shoes.
In what becomes a surprising turn of events for the pair, however, one farmhouse reveals a buried fallout shelter equipped with every material comfort – “The richness of a vanished world” (139). The description of the bunker warrants repetition here for its drastic contrast to the dearth of the world above: “Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets” (138). This bounty appears before them like the interior of a Costco, offering what would seem a limitless supply of food and sundries for their exclusive use. For a moment in the narrative, McCarthy seems to acquiesce to readers’ expectations of genre again, providing a safe haven for his protagonists where they can be restored and, at least temporarily, shielded from the stark horrors to which they have been subjected. Gone for a moment are the fears and dark realities of their consumed world; and yet, this abundance can only be enjoyed for a short time. The truth of this fleeting respite, however, is that this bunker is merely emblematic of the pre-apocalyptic world and its resources, which despite their apparent profusion are in fact finite. This is yet another “siren call” from which the pair must flee, lest they be seduced into a false sense of security, and like those people who built the bunker with the belief in its ability to sustain them, succumb to its inevitable exploitation by other of the road’s travelers. Both recognize that this reprieve is temporary, that the machine driving their progress from the past to the future cannot be stopped.

As the pair continues on their journey, they return to a state of careful rationing, stretching what supplies they are able to carry, but aware that their survival will depend upon continued scavenging. And yet they persist, refusing to give in to the other
chilling option, which is being broadcast continuously throughout the narrative. In observing the characters’ determination to survive on the meager offerings provided on the road, readers are faced with the central conflict in the narrative, which is represented in a principal question, that is, the question of cannibalism. Morality, in this final world, becomes a question of whether or not to consume human flesh.

The foreboding and often terrifying presence of flesh-eating monsters is a common thematic element of the post-apocalyptic genre. McCarthy is faithful in providing such monsters to his vision of his broken world, delivering the darkest message in the central conflict of the narrative. Rather than conjuring the radiated mutants, vampires and zombies tend to populate the post apocalyptic genre, McCarthy instead taps into a historical preoccupation with cannibalism; *The Road* proposes a scenario in which the real monster is the apex consumer – in this case, the one who is willing to consume human flesh. Having exhausted all readily available food sources, humanity is faced with this one remaining means of sustenance. Drawing perhaps from well-known stories of survival cannibalism as depicted in shipwreck tales of marooned sailors or the tragedy of the Donner Party and other famous survival cannibal tales, the narrative proposes a worldwide survival cannibalism scenario.

The fear of cannibals, or rather the fascination with them, can be traced back to the earliest human records. Cannibalism is a trope that appears to occupy a permanent place in the literary imagination. Explorers to the New World, as well as the earliest colonists, insisted upon listing cannibalism among the barbarous traits of the Indians. William Arens’s article “Rethinking Anthropophagy” discusses how the belief in the ritual or gustatory cannibalism in the world has long been accepted as fact in circles as
refined as the academy itself (44). In his famous essay “Of Cannibals,” Michel de Montaigne reflects not on whether the natives engaged in cannibalism or not, but rather on how their cannibalism was somehow more noble than the inhumanities enacted upon Europeans in their own lands (1636). Whether or not people engage in cannibalism becomes a “moot point,” according to Arens in *The Man-Eating Myth*, as having assimilated the myth as a literary trope serves its purpose without its being based on a consistent human reality. So it seems appropriate that McCarthy would use this post-apocalyptic New World as the staging area for the last stand of the ultimate taboo of human consumption, initially foreshadowed by the jackknifed tractor-trailer filled with dead bodies, whose deaths in the trailer perhaps only prevented their eventual butchering and consumption by cannibals. McCarthy uses the images with which readers are already quite familiar to communicate his scathing commentary on consumerism.

Symbolically, the image of the cannibal provides more than a grotesque and disquieting scene or human depravity or desperation; rather, it serves as a powerfully provocative metaphor for consumerism of a variety that eliminates all pretense of humanity. From its earliest conception, the idea of the cannibal has been used to evoke horror in audiences, eager to conceive of a palpable reason to distrust the Other in their encounter with him. Few distinctions serve the function of establishing boundaries as well as that of cannibalism. According to Arens, it is this distinction by which “. . . one group can appreciate its own existence more meaningfully by conjuring up others as categorical opposites” (*Man-Eating Myth* 145). For the man, and through him the boy, cannibalism (or rather the fear of cannibalism) serves as a primary apprehension which propels them both along the road to some other destiny. Cannibalism is the borderland
that the road traverses, the line dividing moral and immoral behavior, and the ultimate symbolic link to their consumerist past from which they are fleeing.

In remaining consistent with his departure from genre, however, McCarthy refuses to deliver the whole picture of the cannibal; rather, he flashes before his readers’ eyes scenes that both fulfill and deny their expectation of the cannibal fantasy. While father and son, and by proxy the reader, encounter several scenes that imply cannibalism, they never actually witness it. Like the records of early explorers and colonists, which lack first hand evidence to the fact, McCarthy’s cannibals are always discovered after the fact; he seems to be more concerned with the means that cannibals of his narrative acquire their meat than with the act itself, which is a forgone assumption. Instead of viewing actual cannibalism, readers view, with the protagonist, a tractor-trailer or a walk-in cooler filled with corpses; a commodified population of human livestock being transported via the symbolic vehicles of the consumer economy. Even in the absence of the original mechanisms that allowed the widespread slaughter and distribution of beef cattle, pigs and other animals for food, the ever-present, industrious human machine of consumer culture thrives.

It is the fear of consumption, of being consumed, that drives the actions of the protagonists. Cannibalism is symbolic of the systems in which human beings live - the old ways, as defined by capitalism and consumerism, is to kill or be killed, eat or be eaten. This is, symbolically and literally, the system from which the protagonists flee. Readers are reminded perhaps of their own fears of being consumed and exploited in the marketplaces in which they are employed. McCarthy’s reliance on this ancient taboo, while seemingly adhering to the requirements of genre, actually inverts the genre,
suggesting finally that our desire to consume – to witness the cannibal act – is commensurate with our fears of being victims of acts of cannibalism that rob us of our subjectivity. According to Maggie Kilgour, in her article, “The Function of Cannibalism in the Present Time,”

This unsettling of discrete categories is part of its [cannibalism’s] horror: it is the place where desire and dread, love and aggression meet, and where the body is made symbolic, the literal the figurative, the human reduced to mere matter. In fact, cannibalism involves both the establishing of absolute difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the dissolution of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them, and makes the two one. (240)

To extend Kilgour’s assessment to the novel’s statement about consumerism, we find that the horror of cannibalism is not only the moral taboo against eating flesh, but that the identities to which we hold are so easily dissolved. As avid consumers, we must admit that, regardless of our justifications for the consumption in which most of us are so enthusiastically engaged, consumerism kills us. Worse yet, our continual pursuit of “stuff” turns us into “stuff,” which, in a twist of barbaric irony, makes us worthy to be consumed, a concept portrayed vividly in the cannibal nightmare scenes of *The Road*. Several scenes that point explicitly to the act of cannibalism by other characters in the story support the “second-hand account” status of the actual events. McCarthy’s suggestion that cannibalism is actually taking place in the narrative is less significant than the belief by the man, and the reader, that it is. In one horrific scene, McCarthy’s paints a vivid picture for the reader. Following a fatal confrontation between the protagonists and an unnamed character, presumed to be a cannibal, the father returns to the scene to retrieve their grocery cart (another icon of American consumerism) and any supplies that were not stolen by the horde of cannibals of which the victim of the
shooting was a member. Upon his arrival at the location where the presumed cannibals had camped, he finds a grisly scene, which reads much like one of Columbus’s cannibal feasts. Again, McCarthy denies readers’ the almost pornographic scene of the feast, and instead describing the completeness with which the man, a former member of the cannibal band, had been consumed. “Coming back he found the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts. He pushed at the bones with the toe of his shoe. They looked to have been boiled. No pieces of clothing” (McCarthy 71).

While this scene vividly depicts carnage, McCarthy is careful not to reveal too much of the nature of what the scene signifies. Readers are free to assume, as Columbus did, the cannibal origins of the remains that he finds. However, just as the explorer’s account fails to report the full explanation of what is seen, McCarthy’s narrator leaves out the most important details that would make the man an actual eyewitness to the act. McCarthy’s readers, like Columbus’s audiences in Europe, are allowed to let their imaginations run wild, creating scenarios that are not explained by the evidence, but rather, that confirm preexisting beliefs about the events that produced the evidence. Readers are led to believe, as is the man and the boy, in “cannibal hordes lurking on the border” (Arens, “Rethinking Anthropophagy” 44).

In a subsequent and far more disquieting scene, the man arrives with his protesting son to an apparently abandoned mansion, where he discovers a rude rope-and-bell alerting mechanism for procuring cannibal victims. The man’s investigation of the property slowly reveals to him the details of the house’s purpose, simultaneously drawing and repelling him. Despite the signs that begin to appear and the desperate pleas of his son to leave the place, the man cannot resist the desire to confirm his suspicions; “All
these things he saw and did not see” as he observes a “forty gallon castiron [sic] cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs” (McCarthy 109). Further investigation of the house reveals, beneath a locked trapdoor in the kitchen, a group of emaciated victims, destined for that cast iron cauldron, who beg him for help. The victims are in every state of degradation – naked, covered in their own filth, each of them awaiting consumption above in this house of horrors. Horrifyingly, “on the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (110); presumably this victim has been partially consumed, his wounds cauterized in lieu of a more efficient method of preserving the meat embodied in his person. This scene shows an extreme expression of the commoditization of human beings as a food source for a group of cannibal super-consumers, and a graphic metaphor for the exploitation of human resources in the modern world. McCarthy seems to be suggesting that the line marking the limit of human consumption is barely discernable, if not altogether non-existent.

McCarthy is not content pardon the man, as his protagonist, from culpability in the consumer scenario either. The man’s reaction to the barbaric scene is to flee for his own life, narrowly escaping capture himself from a quickly approaching group of man-eaters. His search of the property serves to confirm his assumptions about the nature of the cannibals in his new world, but it does not inspire him to give mercy and provide relief to the victims. As heir to the ideologies preceding the world’s apocalypse, the man bears the indelible imprint of consumerism, and although he takes the effort, time and obvious risk to investigate, it is merely for his (and our) voyeuristic gratification. It provides yet another layer of condemnation of the barbarity of those who would practice cannibalism for their own sustenance; yet, it also reveals with stark realism, the nature of
the man’s own deeply rooted self-interest. He is concerned only with his safety and the
safety of his son, who despite what he witnesses under his father’s care, still wants to
help the people they encounter. While the man is willing to consume the knowledge of
cannibalism, he is unwilling to act morally on the victims’ behalf, in effect, benefiting
from the exploitation of other victims. McCarthy here points to the propensity of people
to make moral distinctions while failing to act upon them, and arguably, his readers’ are
implicated in this offense. Complacency, the narrative suggests, is perhaps the greatest
sin of the consumerist mindset, where one assumes a superior moral posture based upon
the boundaries he establishes between himself and others. As Montaigne states,

I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am
heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I
think there is no more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and
in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit
by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only
read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among
neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and
religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead. (1636)

A final scene of cannibalism, and perhaps the most perplexing, expresses the
depths to which mankind is willing to sink in its mindless obsession to consume. Again,
the father driven by a desire to see the evidence that the boy seems intuitively to know is
there.

They walked into the little clearing, the boy clutching his hand. They’d taken
everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. He
was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face
against him. He looked quickly to see what had happened . . . What the boy had
seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He
bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close.
I’m sorry, he whispered. I’m sorry. (McCarthy 198)
Even the perpetrators of this vile act have gone, having “left their food cooking.” Although prior to witnessing the scene, the man initially attributes their departure to his having a gun, a more consistent interpretation suggests that the cannibals fled in shame, aware even in their depravity of the extreme wrongness of their act. Such behavior is beyond even the pornographic distinctions of the post-apocalyptic genre. What purpose could McCarthy have in showing this scene? It could suggest that in a culture driven by consumption, unconscionable acts take place as a result of them not being seen. The fact is that children even today are worked to death in American factories established in third world countries for the sake of satisfying American consumer appetites. During no time in history has a universal limit existed preventing the exploitation of children in any type of heinous employment. And yet, despite the outward expression of morality by consumer America, coupled with the undeniable truth of the existence of the exploitation of children in the marketplace, production and consumption continue unabated. The regular appearance of pregnant women in the company of the cannibals therefore signify a horrifying message to the reader – that the womb of a child’s mother, in McCarthy’s metaphor, has essentially become a cold-storage unit for the consumable flesh of her children.

McCarthy, while clinging to some of the vital features of the post-apocalyptic narrative, is able to communicate a drastically novel message, suggesting that humanity’s insatiable consumerism can lead inevitably to one destination only. The linear nature of the materials economy is incompatible with a planet containing finite resources. Ultimately, humanity’s unchecked consumption will result in the complete exhaustion of all of the earth’s resources, which includes humanity itself, which by its very dependence
on nature cannot be excluded from this equation. The man-eaters that populate *The Road* serve as terrifying symbolic reminders that the same impulses driving cannibals to consume each other are possibly reflected in readers themselves – each of whom is complicit in perpetuating the world-ruining machinery of consumption. In *The Road* the trope of cannibalism provides a driving force from which to flee, propelling the protagonists forward toward their goal and the end of their journey; at the end of narrative the man, his goal completed, succumbs to tuberculosis – known until recently as “consumption.” A resident of the previous time, he is unable to transform is finally consumed by his own body, and the boy is thereby freed from his attachments and able to mature as he trusts himself into the care of the future, taking him to a new, uncertain, but recognizably hopeful, future.

While the bulk of McCarthy’s narrative can probably be viewed as depressingly fatalistic, it would be inaccurate to say that *The Road* is a story without hope. Despite the devastating and horrifying events that lead to the conclusion of this novel, the narrative seems to suggest, as does much of the post-apocalyptic genre, that renewal is not only necessary but possible. Continuing on the course that humanity is currently traveling will result in very limited outcomes. Whether humanity decides to change or a global cataclysm forces its hand, the future will inevitably arrive, bringing with it either the consequences of the unchecked consumption of the planet’s resources, or the solutions that preempt them. The boy’s safe arrival at the end of the novel suggests that while the world may be irrevocably changed by its present course, a future exists for those who hope in a better world.
McCarthy’s narrative seems to propose that while the human race is prone to self-destruction, it is also capable of great mercy. He seems to suggest three general responses to the reality of life on earth, each of which determines the futures toward which we progress. Which response is ultimately behind our lives’ choices? Are we driven by hardship to despair and suicide, to the utter depravity of consumption and licentiousness, or, possibly the most difficult of the three, to hope. These responses are illustrated emblematically within the narrative. Described in the father’s heartbreaking memory, the boy’s mother describes her response, preferring self-destruction and its perceived peace to hoping in an uncertain, and likely difficult future, denying even her maternal obligations in favor of suicide. In the face of the cannibalistic reality of the world, she is unable to hope, and succumbs to despair, saying “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it” (56). While her logic seems certain, her assumptions serve merely to justify her lack of concern or action on the behalf of others, namely her husband and her son. Her claim that taking the boy with her is “the right thing to do” (58) is a result of philosophical arguments that lack conviction. Like a witness to the death camps, she chooses to retreat in what is in effect the supreme act of consumption, taking her own life with a “flake of obsidian…the edge of an atom thick” (58), leaving the man and boy to proceed alone on the road.

On other end of the spectrum, we find the cannibal “road-agents,” busy in the commerce of harvesting the last marketable commodity on earth, human flesh. Applying the vast collective experiences of capitalist enterprise and consumerism to the new post-apocalyptic economy, these characters seem to thrive in the cruelty of their brutal
practice, embracing a licentiousness that is afforded by the fall of civilization, reducing human beings “to mere matter,” to enable their ingestion. The implication seems clear: more hopeless perhaps than suicide, complete abandonment of decency and morality signifies an abandonment of humanity itself. Why hope in what does not exist? What indeed could prevent a person from joining in this free for all, save a lingering morality based on a hope in a higher spiritual purpose? Hope in the past practices of a self-absorbed race is at least something one can hold. An image of the primal alliances of mankind is clearly seen in a moment of this narrative, where the man and boy view from the concealment of a roadside embankment, the passage of “an army in tennis shoes, tramping” along the road.

Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon . . . The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry. . . Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illeclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. (92)

This primitive image seems to embody the spirit of licentiousness at the heart of the cannibal motif of the narrative. By completely embracing a warlike reversion to a barbaric state, rejecting all vestiges of moral behavior, these monstrous apparitions seem to represent the hopelessness that disinhersits human spirituality. They seem to reinforce the man’s statement, early in the novel, that “On this road there are no godspoke men” (33).

Finally, the boy represents the embodiment of a spiritual purity that exists neither in the pre- nor post-apocalyptic worlds, but who must in fact be escorted away
from one and through the other to arrive at a place where his goodness can be fully realized. According to the man, the boy is “a golden chalice. Good to house a god” (75). At the end of his journey, the boy is transformed into a mature believer in the “fire” he carried, protected by his father, in whose absence he is finally able to shine. Such an ending suggests that perhaps despite the apparent death course on which the human race is tramping forward, salvation exists for those who cling to hope for a better future, as long as that future departs from the failed practices of the past, rather than reliving them.
CHAPTER IV

ENVISIONING THE POST-APOCALYPTIC

“NEW WORLD”

At its roots, the genre of post-apocalyptic literature acknowledges what seems a universal human fear of the end of the world, or at least, the end of the world as we currently know it. The genre generally asserts that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of our industrial-technological past and present are destined for a destructive collision course with the future, the outcome of which will force humanity to either redefine itself or perish. That humankind in some way holds power over its own destiny is both an alluring and a terrifying power. Although mankind’s awareness of this power is certainly nothing new, his recent discoveries in science and technology have imposed a more intensified perspective on it. The Cold War, in particular, with its accompanying proliferation of nuclear weapons capable of demolishing the entire planet, revealed Man’s horrifyingly destructive capacity. Not surprisingly, this ominous perspective on reality has birthed a unique type of narrative imagination, particularly in the realm of science fiction, spawning stories that attempt to engage our modern identity as, according to the man in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, a “creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end” (59).

And therein lies the primary appeal of the post-apocalyptic novel, a literary exploration of unseen new worlds in which readers have the opportunity to indulge the
fantasy realms into which they may, in reality, fear to tread. Readers can participate in the unraveling of a world of nightmare prophecies without being vaporized by a nuclear blast, infected with a deadly virus, or devastated by a colossal natural disaster. Interestingly, while the post-apocalyptic genre is an exploration of hypothetical futures, its success in exploring them seems to rely upon historical and mythological tropes with which readers can readily identify. In other words, the old world, essential to the construction of the apocalyptic narrative, is mirrored by the new. Its distorted features – the devastated landscapes peopled by mysterious and terrible creatures – are specters, reminder of the reader’s present reality. In particular, strong parallels can be made between the construction of the post-apocalyptic tale and the works of early European writers encountering the New World of the Americas. In our modern era, devoid of new earthly frontiers, it is in this often disturbing modern genre that readers can engage, in a novel way, the familiar mythos that underlie America’s first writings, exploring the “new worlds” of the narrative imagination.

Richard Slotkin argues in *Regeneration through Violence* that many early American writers “attempted to fabricate an ‘American epic’ that would mark the beginning of a national mythology, providing a context for all works to come after” (3). This fabrication would help to create a national identity which would reflect “the most progressive ideas of American man, emphasizing the rule of reason in nature and in human affairs, casting aside all inherited traditions, superstitions, and spurious values of the past” (3). This myth-making effort would form a foundation upon which would be built an American literary self-concept, inspiring the works, and the ideologies, of the generations that would follow these earliest visionaries. These works would begin with
the epistolary writings of the earliest explorers and colonists, and extend to our most recent writers of popular and literary fiction – influencing the imaginations of science fiction writers, from whose creative efforts would emerge the stark and symbolic subgenre of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Columbus, author and subject of some of the New World’s earliest writings, illuminates some of the presupposed assumptions that accompanied him and his crew on his journeys to the Americas. The observations of his first encounters with the New World display an oft-repeated pattern of characteristics that would appear in the later travel missives and New World narratives of later writers. They would, furthermore, offer a unique window into what would be, in terms of earthly frontiers, the last “first.” Never again might an earthly “new world” be discovered, in which such potential for human material profit existed. The opportunities must have appeared limitless to these newcomers as they looked inland toward rich, unutilized soil, unexploited mines, and a vast, densely-forested wilderness flanking the eastern borders of the Americas. A long-fabled Utopia must have seemed at hand, Paradise appearing before them like a biblical vision, filled with the promise of renewal – a return to a fabled idyllic past that existed before the world was “tainted” by humanity’s interference.

Despite the newness of this place, Columbus’s writings, as discussed in Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America*, reveal a solidly constructed set of “old world” perspectives that dramatically influence Columbus’s perceptions of the New World. As revealed in his travel journals, Columbus is dependent upon these elements of both his and his audiences’ contextual realities to describe what his is encountering. Descriptions of the weather reveal the New World to resemble that of “April in
Andalusia” (Hale 96); birds are described by referencing those found in Spain. Columbus is, in a sense, forced to rely on old definitions to interpret the new features of his emerging environment.

Similarly, the protagonists of the post-apocalyptic narrative, and their readers, approach an interpretation of their New Worlds with a tightly-defined base of preconceived assumptions and expectations. Readers’ entries into the post-apocalyptic worlds of I Am Legend and The Road are accompanied by a world of expectations, fears and apprehensions, as well as appetites, which are either confirmed or denied by the narratives. Like Columbus, the post-apocalyptic protagonist is entirely dependent upon his memories of and experiences in the world as it existed before whatever disaster has occurred to separate him from it. Thus in these new environments, audiences observe with the protagonists the crumbling remnants of the pre-apocalyptic world – Neville hunts deer with an AR-15 assault rifle in Times Square, giant billboards for the Broadway musicals Wicked and Rent prominently displayed, and yet performed and viewed by no one. Similarly, the father and son in The Road repeatedly enter abandoned cities where the skeletal remains of buildings and houses rot away at their foundations. This is an essential feature of the genre, an expectation that must be fulfilled for readers, who immediately recognize the genre by their inclusion. And yet, the expectation extends beyond the physically destroyed settings to the living (or undead) inhabitants of the new world as well, which exist as a necessary ingredient of the genre as well. This trope is in place for Columbus, whose new world is certainly far from uninhabited.

In developing an interpretation of what he sees and experiences in the New World, Todorov writes that Columbus also relies upon a multitude of religious and
classical tropes to construct his understanding, believing “not only in Christian dogma, but also . . . in Cyclopes and mermaids, in Amazons and men with tails, and his belief . . . permits him to find them” (15). Columbus “knows,” in advance, that what he will discover in the lands he believes to be the Orient will confirm his expectations. His journals and letters from his first voyage are littered with various reports of sightings of mythological creatures. His writings further express his belief that his voyages are drawing him near to the earthly Paradise – the actual Garden of Eden – where during his third journey he divines that a perceived irregularity in the curvature of the earth indicates its location (16). His belief, constructed by the writings of the old world, guides his interpretation of the New.

According to Todorov, “Columbus performs a ‘finalist’ strategy of interpretation” in which “the ultimate meaning is given from the start,” and “what is sought is the path linking the initial meaning . . . with this ultimate meaning” (17). The resulting interpretation, therefore, leaves no room for the negotiation of the newness of his absolutely unique situation, particularly in his encounter with the native inhabitants of the New World. Thus when he discovers people in the Caribbean islands, he is convinced of their fulfillment of the ancient categories, rather than their occupation of new ones. He can very simply deny the existence of any signs that counter his preexisting notions of the indigenes. It is not surprising then that native realities, from an absence of clothing to incoherent language, are all indicators that confirm preconceptions. Nudity, for instance, equates to primitive, as it reflects a departure from a European (and distinctly Christian) observance of modesty:
revealing that the first characteristic of these people to strike Columbus is the absence of clothes – which in their turn symbolize culture (whence Columbus’s interest in people wearing clothes, who might relate more closely to what is known of the Grand Khan; he is somewhat disappointed to have found nothing but savages). (34)

The belief that clothing is an indication of civilization derives from Columbus’s (and thereby “civilized” Europe’s) long-valued convictions about nakedness, which relates to Adam and Eve’s original sin in the Garden of Eden. It is also an indication of other cultural deprivations inherent in primitive humans: “Physically naked, the Indians are also, to Columbus’s eyes, deprived of all cultural property: they are characterized, in a sense, by the absence of customs, rites, religion . . .” (35). Stephen Greeblatt echoes this view in Learning to Curse, where he writes that “the mention of the nakedness of the Indians is typical; to a ruling class obsessed with the symbolism of dress, the Indians’ physical appearance was a token of a cultural void. In the eyes of the Europeans, the Indians were culturally naked” (17). Columbus’s first confirming perceptions of the native peoples of the New World fulfill a virtually prophetic line of reasoning, enabling him to draw empowering conclusions and justifications for his subsequent actions among those peoples. Armed with the “knowledge” of the subhuman condition of the Indians, Columbus is free to act on the authority of his superior, a priori knowledge and cultural identity.

In the modern writers’ approaches to creating post-apocalyptic new worlds, those worlds’ mirror-image inhabitants must inherit the traits attributed to the savages of the early Americas as well. The protagonist, adhering to old world expectations, must necessarily view those characters he encounters in a way that sets him apart from them. The characteristics within the “vampire” community of I Am Legend perpetuate Neville’s
preconceived notions about their non-human status in relation to himself. His moral
distance from them, who exhibit an absence of “typical human behavior,” precludes any
possible evidence to the contrary, and allows Neville to pursue intentions predating his
current conflict with them. He is unequipped to interpret any of their behaviors as even
remotely human due to his assumptions about the motives behind their behavior. This is
why the lead vampire’s emergence into the sun in pursuit of his captured mate can only
be interpreted as a desperate effort to procure Neville as food, not as an aggressive
attempt to rescue his peer. This encounter, recorded later by Neville into his video
journal, illuminates his lack of his incomprehension of the signs displayed before him:

A behavioral note . . . an infected male exposed himself to sunlight today.
Now, it’s possible decreased brain function, or growing scarcity of food is causing
them to ignore their basic survival instincts. Social de-evolution appears complete.
Typical human behavior is now entirely absent. (I Am Legend)

Like Columbus, Neville’s mistaken interpretation of the vampire’s behavior
leads him to false conclusions about its human status. The behavior fits his prejudicial
opinion and therefore requires no rethinking. Similarly, Columbus’s interpretations
preclude their humanity, making them “good servants” and easy converts to the Christian
faith (Hale 20).

Further illustrating this observation, McCarthy’s father character insists on
perceiving any other inhabitants on the road as potential cannibalistic savages – “bad
guys” – that are distinctly separate and morally inferior to him and his son, who are
“good guys” (129). One scene in particular describes a vividly savage-looking band of
“bad guys” as they march past on the road, carrying primitively-fashioned weapons tribal
regalia. While this references a primal identity in humanity, the images it conjures in
readers’ minds is one of nostalgic remembrance of a time when modern confronted the
primitive in the theatre of the New World encounter. The signs of primitive life are
unmistakable and terrifying, much as they may have been to European audiences
encountering Columbus’s and other explorers’ missive accounts. And yet while the father
may in fact be correct in his assumptions, his prejudice disallows any variation in his
reaction to other, less-threatening encounters on their journey. His commitment to a
preformulated truth about Ely, an old man the man believes to be a “shill for a pack of
roadagents” (172), prevents him from imagining any alliances. All others must remain
categorically separate for the sake of their survival.

Like Columbus, who has already predetermined that the new “lands” are to be
gained for Spain, the protagonists of the post-apocalyptic narrative reject any evidence
that the inhabitants might actually be entitled a claim to it. The “lands” in these stories
consist more of a moral or civil code than of actual physical geography; however, the
implication is the same – these lands are being established for the colonizer. The
protagonist in *The Road*, like Columbus, makes no attempt to understand the new place
into which he has emerged, nor the people, but clings to the old ways of handling
unfamiliar people and situations, achieving the familiar results. This familiar trope within
the genre seems to secure its protagonists, as well as audiences, in their judgment of
encounters. Doing so acknowledges the possibility that the status of the protagonist is
concretely established – that he, and by extension audiences, are at the center rather than
the fringe of the narrative. This belief is both intentional and accidental, as again, the
protagonist is required, by habit and by force of will, to access earlier memories to
interpret his current environs.
Further exacerbating his reductive assumptions about the subhuman status of the Indians, their native languages are incomprehensible to Columbus and his men. Apart from ascertaining the names for certain islands and other geographical features of the area (which he misinterprets and transliterates – thus his adoption of the term “Canib” to represent the “Carib” Indian, a term ultimately morphed into the terrible “Cannibal” label ascribed to all primitive peoples), Columbus has no interest in acquiring anything more of their language. According to Todorov:

Columbus’s failure to recognize the diversity of languages permits him, when he confronts a foreign tongue, only two possible, and complementary, forms of behavior: to acknowledge it as a language but to refuse to believe it is different; or to acknowledge its difference but to refuse to admit it is a language. . . (30)

Resistance to acknowledging his own lack of understanding forces Columbus to base his interpretations, and misinterpretations, on native signs. While his writings are full of elaborate, eloquently expressed Indian utterances, they are reportedly gleaned from interpretations of hand gestures and the aid of European interpreters who had no prior experience with native languages. According to Todorov, “Columbus regularly claims to understand what is said to him, while giving, at the same time, every proof of incomprehension” (31). By his own repeated admission throughout his journals, he states his lack of understanding of native language, and yet, continues to insist on the truth of his understanding of their words. In one instance, Las Casas, quoted in Todorov’s *Conquest*, writes that

the Admiral surmised that they [the Caribs] were assuring him that his coming was a welcome event . . ., but he saw the face of the Indian whom he had taken with him (and who understands the language) . . . saying by signs that the Admiral should leave the river because they sought to kill him. (32)
The reliance on “native signs” is an interesting technique in the post-apocalyptic novel by which the authors enable the audience to interpret, or more often misinterpret, what is being viewed by the protagonists as they confront their antagonists. Like Columbus, Neville in *I Am Legend* witnesses many characteristics of the Darkseekers, so named for their physical vulnerability to the daylight, that puzzle him. He is, in a sense, forced to rely on a limited set of contextual evidence, being a creature of day, to interpret the behaviors, vocalizations, and visual representations of the mysterious and frightening creatures that roam the night. From their daytime sleeping habits and extreme aggression to their absence of clothing, hygiene and recognizable language, Neville relies on his preexisting contextual knowledge of normal human behavior to interpret the nature of the Darkseekers. By the conclusion of the film, particularly in its alternate ending, audiences are shown the errors of his assumptions, which ignored another set of subtle “native signs.”

Similarly, the father in *The Road* continually both encounters and signs, “a message in each such late history, a message and a warning” (McCarthy 91), that seem to perpetuate a tension in the narrative, both for the protagonists and readers. In the peculiar leavings in the abandoned structures and dwellings they inspect, the man finds portents and prophetic signs – a jar of canned tomatoes which “someone before him had not trusted,” a pile of small animal bones, a host of diminutive indicators. The man also leaves signs for the reader in his cryptic ruminations as to the nature of their world, left as scraps for the readers to puzzle out. Ultimately, however, these signs create narrative suspense leading readers to experience the conflict with the Other in predictable ways. Lying in wait along the road and in the darkened, seemingly vacant buildings, it is
believed, are hordes of dangerous beings bent on the destruction, and ultimately the consumption, of the protagonists. Readers’ trust in the signs confirms it; however, the conflict often leads to unpredictable conclusions.

Underlying the stated goals of the protagonists in each narrative, and ultimately the expectations of the readers of the post-apocalyptic genre, is a pervading hope, perhaps, that the condition of humanity can be improved. In other words, it is the expectation of the audiences of these narratives that the protagonists save the world, like Columbus, by “restoring” it to some previous Edenic state. Again, within the narrative itself, although not always stated directly, the placement of a protagonist at the center of a new world narrative essentially establishes that character as a hero, whose purpose is to reconcile the situation for posterity, that others might benefit from his efforts. Explicitly, Neville’s primary focus as a character – the sole character in fact – is to restore mankind to its pre-infection state, in which people engaged in “typical human behavior.” The father in McCarthy’s narrative is traveling a hostile passage from the past world to the future one, “carrying the fire” contained within his spiritually pure son. Audiences, who are rooted in the present world, expect this effort to be made. To create a space in which the protagonists can somehow restore or rebuilt the ruined world – either physically or morally – is arguably the purpose of the narrative itself. This aim is expressed clearly in the writings of Columbus as well.

Paramount to Columbus’s goals in the New World, aside from his clearly stated endeavor to find gold, is his intention to claim the lands and its people not only for Spain, but for the whole of Christendom. His view of the natives, therefore, as savages is essential to his related goal of subduing them. It is never assumed that native culture
should be understood, but rather that it must be brought into conformity with Spanish
custom and the rule of the church. In Todorov’s view, “There is never a justification of
this desire to make the Indians adopt the Spanish customs; its rightness is self-evident”
(43). Ironically, despite the intention to convert the savages to the Christian faith, the
question of the Indians’ humanity is not seriously considered. Unlike Las Casas, who
alone commented on the later inhumanities enacted upon the Indians by the Spaniards,
Columbus’s interest in them was strictly material. As savages they are worthy either of
enslavement or extermination – “material conquest (and all that it implies) will be both
the result and the condition of spiritual expansion” (44).

Columbus’s observations of the New World, according to Todorov, ultimately
typify what would be the standard European view, that the New World could be
measured by its material wealth. The natives of these lands were simply one aspect of this
wealth, one which would require particular massaging due to the Indians’ perplexing
resemblance to men. Nonetheless, their presence on Europe’s new land acquisition
offered no real barrier to colonization, and could in fact provide an adequate workforce:
“They would be good servants, and of good disposition, for I see that they repeat very
quickly everything which is said to them. And I believe that they could easily be made
Christians, for it seems to me that they have no belief” (Hale 20). For Columbus, the
Indians are merely a commodity that presents no more significant potential for
exploitation than any other of the many wonders he discovers in the New World. He is
content to count them among the trees and wildlife, about whose descriptions he writes
quite eloquently. For Todorov,
Everything is in the sequence of these few sentences: Columbus’s summary perception of the Indians, a mixture of authoritarianism and condescension; the incomprehension of their language and of their signs; the readiness with which he alienates the other’s goodwill with a view to a better knowledge of the islands he is discovering; the preference for land over men. In Columbus’s hermeneutics human beings have no particular place. (33)

Similarly, the post-apocalyptic representation of its “natives” performs similar functions, as the characters’ confrontations with their respective antagonists ultimately serve to further their aims in the newly reforming world. Neville’s explicitly stated intention to “fix this” situation by finding a cure clearly implies that those infected with the virus have not, despite their ability to survive it, been improved by it. Despite their dramatically enhanced physical strength and warlike prowess, qualities which audiences greatly value in Neville, they are still seen as needing to be “saved.” Neville is incapable of conceiving that, from the creatures’ perspective, life after the virus may actually resemble a more desirable mode of existence for those survivors, and that it is Neville, in reality, whose survival is marked by immunity to the virus, that is worse off. Matheson’s novel, in contrast perhaps to readers’ expectations, leaves the protagonist in the clutches of a new society of vampires awaiting his execution as the one they perceive to be the ultimate threat to their kind. In an ironic twist, Matheson’s Neville comes to a surprising epiphany that he was the “abnormal one” and “that they were afraid of him” (169).

The Road’s father, although more concerned with avoiding confrontation with the cannibals that in converting them, also recognizes the relative appropriateness of their existence in this ragged new world, and that he and his son are distinctly out of place there. His insistence on teaching his son the identity of the “bad guys” in relation to their identities as “the good guys” expresses essentially the same paradigm. Despite the
primitive rightness of the “ragged hordes” wandering the countryside, perfectly adapted

to the scarcity of food, feeding on lone human travelers in time without law or moral

code, the man and boy maintain a stubborn adherence to what amounts to an ascetic

spiritual discipline, preferring to scavenge rather than resort to cannibalism. In

McCarthy’s apocalypse, this is a vulnerability that humanizes them and dehumanizes the

others in the story not like them. This vulnerability is what leads the man, equipped with

one bullet in his pistol, to proclaim to his son, “I will kill anyone who touches you”

(McCarthy 77).

The European justification of the enslavement and murder of the indigenous

peoples was perhaps influenced by no more significant belief than that of native

cannibalism, a belief exploited by writers of post-apocalyptic fiction. Pre-colonial

writings of explorers, conquistadors, and missionaries universally prescribe to the

purported truth that the primitive peoples of the New World ate each other. According to

Slotkin, in reference to John Bradford’s representation of the natives, “Of all the

anticipated perils, the threat of Indian cannibals evoked the strongest emotion” (38). That

belief, in fact, persists today, aided by generations of colonial writings and

anthropological ethnographies that confirm it. Ironically, it is also a common expectation

of readers of post-apocalyptic narratives as well, who seem to revel in the threat and

taboo of the act of eating human flesh. And yet, William Arens, in his controversial 1979

study The Man-Eating Myth, brings to light the prejudicial nature of cannibal stories as

they relate to the encounter with indigenous cultures. His argument claims that these

writings do not adhere to a commitment to scientific truth-finding, and that “there is little
science or scholarship involved; but a substantial amount of scientism and ethnocentrism” (Man-Eating Myth 21) is consistently required for such conclusions.

The majority of early reports of cannibalism, at large, are given by individuals representing concerns that stand to gain from such a disturbing distinction as cannibalism. Arens reports that “rather than being an actual deed, cannibalism existed as an aspect of political ideology, and was employed in the process of attempting to discredit a political rival” (Man-Eating Myth 94). Many accounts of supposed cannibalism were offered by rival tribes, each insisting that the other engaged in the horrifying act. More important than the story of the cannibal is the idea of the cannibal, a being like ourselves who is simultaneously completely unlike us, and willing to engage in what amounts to animal behaviors, a “real-life” monster adhering to none of the rules by which civilized man lives.

While the idea of the cannibal seems a peculiar preoccupation for the European mind, an investigation of the scholarship on cannibalism suggests that it, in part, contributes to the myth-making function of the human imagination. In Arens’s view, “The idea of ‘others’ as cannibals, rather than the act, is the universal phenomenon. The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes others do” (Man-Eating Myth 139). The mythos of the cannibal is most powerful in its ability to establish boundaries between an “us” and a “them.” In the imagining of the Other, a concept initially credited to Hegel, Arens suggests that “one group can appreciate its own existence more meaningfully by conjuring up others as categorical opposites” (Man-Eating Myth 145). With regard to viewing others as cannibals, “what could be more distinctive than creating a boundary between those who do and those who
do not eat human flesh? In effect, this means a line is drawn between the civilized and savage modes of existence, which translate as ‘we’ and ‘they’” (Man-Eating Myth 145). Thus, cannibalism, as the only behavior “we” do not share with “them,” becomes the most persistent and compelling criterion for our Othering of the indigenes.

For the protagonists of I Am Legend and The Road, as well as countless other post-apocalyptic narratives, a phagophobic preoccupation not only motivates survival, but perpetuates the enterprising efforts of those characters, each of whom is driven by the fear of being eaten to survive by eliminating the Other in his midst. Neville is driven to “save” the creatures from their savagery, which includes the consumption of human meat; the man and boy in The Road assure themselves of their status as “good guys” based upon their sustained decision not to “eat people.” Hegel expresses this concept philosophically by stating that the Self “must set itself to sublate the other independent being, in order thereby to become certain of itself as true being” (229). The psychological need for an Other becomes necessary in the encounter with the New World where no prior experience exists. “Each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and hence its own certainty of itself is still without truth” (232). It becomes necessary to draw distinct lines between the Other and the Self in the post-apocalyptic narrative, both for the characters in the story and for readers, whose identities are typically assumed in those of the protagonist. It also becomes a psychological necessity both for explorers and the post-apocalyptic protagonists, each of whom have left behind the cultures that define them. To acknowledge the new culture in which they are immersed as an actual, ordered culture that functions by rules and conventions, would require them to conform to it. If, however, they produce a clear human versus non-human distinction between them, their
mandate is to superimpose their will upon the Others – an obvious benefit to the service of their materialistic goals. Such delineations also firmly establish the perceived goodness of the protagonist as well as the reader by identification.

Thus the genesis and persistence of the cannibal myth, in concert with a host of other mythologies, contribute to a body of belief that serves to sublate the Other in the New World and its related narratives. As Jerry Phillips states,

> The colonial subject could only elevate himself by denigrating other human beings, who then become simply ‘other.’ As demonstrated by Kipling’s claim that the dark native is ‘half-devil, half-child,’ denigration most often followed the routes of infantilisation, demonisation, and animalisation. (190)

Embodied in the Indian, the Other becomes an object, devoid of humanity and therefore worthy of whatever uses European explorers and colonists might desire to execute upon him. For the reasons discussed earlier, Indians, and their post-apocalyptic antecedents, fit into one or more of the following categories: they are childlike, incapable of reason and in need of supervision; demonic, requiring the saving power of European civilization and spiritual enlightenment; or, animalistic, worthy of collection, enslavement, or extermination. Ultimately, the virtually universal accepted view of the Amerindian immeasurably benefited European goals of imperialism. Lands innumerably occupied could be viewed as vacant and free for the taking; resources – gold among them – served no apparent purpose for the indigenous occupants, who seemed content to trade them for trifles of glass beads and bits of broken pottery. It seems that, in addition to the natives’ perceived lack of culture, they had no understanding, nor appreciation, for the immense value of the land they occupied – an oversight from which the European colonizer would be more than happy to benefit.
For the father in *The Road* and especially for Neville, any measures to achieve their purposes become acceptable. Neville need feel no guilt at having essentially harvested and exterminated scores of “natives” in his laboratory experiments, like the laboratory rats displayed earlier in the film. His actions are justified by his noble purpose, his desire to cleanse the unclean, bestowing the purifying goodness of his advanced medical knowledge on the unfortunate creatures. No casualty count is too high in pursuing this course as the identity of those he would save will only be significant if he is successful in converting them back into human beings that share his values and behavioral patterns. Until then, they are simply Other. Similarly, the man in *The Road*, dead set on his sojourn to the coast, can justify withholding mercy from other travelers without losing readers’ sympathy, not because they are any different from him, but because his readers perceive them to be so. The man who was struck by lightning, despite his obvious need and innocuous demeanor, is even described the way a native might be by a chronicler of history.

He was as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull. As they passed he looked down. As if he’d done something wrong. His shoes were bound up with wire and coated with roadtar and he sat there in silence, bent over in his rags. (McCarthy 50)

Ultimately, the man’s perception of such people as Others allows him not to exact violence on them, but rather to permit violence to happen to them. Only once is he guilty of directly committing violence, in his shooting of an attacker, but repeatedly throughout the novel, he allows other characters to suffer and languish without helping them.

The most significant result of casting cannibals as the Other in the post-apocalyptic narrative is that in the portrayal of the Other as the apex consumer, we
ultimately confront our own anxieties about the act of consumption. Cannibalism is an extreme form of consuming, a strict taboo observed universally as antithetical to proper human behavior. And yet, by placing the cannibal threat within the context of a consumed world of mankind’s making, the narrative can communicate what is perhaps a far more complex and significant message. It is not, perhaps, the cannibal that is ultimately at fault in the post-apocalyptic new world. In fact, he is far better suited to exist in a world that has already essentially been consumed by his ancestors. Readers’ become culpable in the creation of conditions leading up to the apocalypse, and are in reality the cause of that world-consumption, craving a diet of stories in which they watch their world cease to exist, but contribute nothing to its preservation. Indeed, they hasten its end.

The post-apocalyptic tale issues weighted political commentary on the nature of man in his truest form as a largely unconscious, resource-consuming plague to an otherwise perfectly balanced and sustainable planet. Driven by rabid appetites, humanity looks only at himself, his own world, his own purpose, completely neglecting the realities of that identity. He is aware that the world is quickly arriving at a point-of-no-return; the signs in the modern world are glaring, emblazoned on every headline, surging through the media chains like an electrical current, displayed prominently before every consumer’s eye. The unfortunate response to the truth of our modern predicament, however, is not to change, but to continue forward in the same path toward an inevitable conclusion. In essence, audiences resemble not the protagonists, whose aims are to transform through action the conditions for which they are at least indirectly responsible, but the antagonists, the monstrous products of the world that birthed them.
Readers of the narrative are confronted by their own monstrous natures, witnessing a symbolic expression of the cultures in which they live, and forced to watch the last of their remaining numbers negotiate the world they have created. Consequently, the consumer driven genre of post-apocalyptic fiction is less science fiction than it is socio-political commentary directed at the very consumer culture that gave it rise. It is an expression of the horror of undisciplined consumption that exploits, abuses, corrupts, and ultimately exhausts the resources at its disposal. The post-apocalyptic novel acknowledges not only the audience’s awareness of the disastrous realities of the world’s present course, but that the audience relies upon the security of those realities. Thus while readers enter into the narrative with a world of expectations and a desire to engage that world in a hypothetical end times scenario, what he will ultimately face is his own end where he will be forced to adapt or perish under the oppressive truth that he is culpable.
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