

DOI: 10.31648/pl.7862

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The significance of symbolism and allegory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* – a new era of post-apocalyptic fiction

Znaczenie symboliki i alegorii w powieści Cormaca McCarthy'ego pt. *Droga*. Nowa era fikcji postapokaliptycznej

Słowa kluczowe: powieść postapokaliptyczna, symbolika, alegoria, ikoniczność w literaturze, ewolucja gatunku

Keywords: post-apocalyptic fiction, symbolism, allegory, iconicity in literature, evolution of the genre

Abstract

McCarthy's *The Road* is frequently described as a gloomy dystopia in which the redemption of humanity is impossible. This essay adopts a different perspective and focuses on the impact of the novel's symbolism on the shifts in its overall message. The analysis leads to uncovering certain oppositions, apparent dichotomies and paradoxes incorporated in the novel's recurring images and motifs, with particular emphasis on the motif of dream vision. McCarthy's ascetic style is also considered in terms of its iconicity and functionality. In other words, this essay argues that the symbolically charged elements of *The Road*, due to their persistence in the text characterised by minimalism, form an intricate pattern which holds the novel's allegorical message. The point advocated is that McCarthy's literary symbolism leaves room for redemption in the world presented and signals the possibility of rebirth. It thus has the potential to gradually undermine and eventually subvert the initial perception of the novel as entirely pessimistic. All things considered, *The Road* is presented as a step forward in the evolution of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, the 2007 Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction, depicts a post-apocalyptic world saturated with brutality. Most of the time

internally focalized, presented from the perspective of two protagonists – father and son – in their day-to-day struggle for survival, McCarthy’s fictional reality seems devastating, also in the very fact that it exposes the tattered remnants of already dead civilization in the environment otherwise burnt to ashes. With all its negative elements, *The Road* is frequently described in McCarthy criticism as a gloomy dystopia in which the redemption of humanity is impossible.

This essay, however, does not examine McCarthy’s work as a symptom of specific historical and environmental problems and thus departs from the conventional interpretation of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction. Instead, it responds to the approach outlined above by focusing on the symbolic veil of *The Road* – the significance of its symbolism which serves to create ambivalent meanings. The aim is to present McCarthy’s novel as a step forward in the evolution of the genre. While many writers of such fiction focus on the technical aspects or the social effects of mass destruction, McCarthy composes a literary work which attracts particular attention to the pattern of its symbolically charged tropes¹: binary oppositions, apparent dichotomies and paradoxes incorporated in its recurring images and motifs, such as that of dream visions². These elements are highlighted by the peculiarities of the novel’s ascetic (and truly poetic) style. More specifically, the point advocated in this essay is that the symbolically charged elements of *The Road*, due to their repetition and sustainability in the text characterised by minimalism, form an intricate functional pattern which reveals the novel’s allegorical message. They may thus be referred to as McCarthy’s supercode³.

¹ The term: *trope* relates to the novel’s recurring motifs and images (see Cuddon and Preston 1998: 948).

² Roland Barthes speaks about different codes in a literary text, shared by the author and the reader, which enable the latter “to correlate, grammatically and semantically, the various elements of the story.” He distinguishes *the symbolic code* as the sphere of the text which comprises “the patterns of antithesis” – the “<groupings> [which] are repeated by various modes and means in the text” (Cuddon 2013: 700). The phrase: symbolic veil used above relates to this terminology. In this essay, symbolism is regarded, in simple words, as “the use of a concrete image to express an emotion or an abstract idea” (Cuddon 2013: 700). More specifically, it is defined, by referring to T. S. Eliot’s concept of objective correlative (Eliot 1919: 941), as the inclusion (in creative writing) of specific objects, characters, settings, situations, or chains of events (referred to as symbolic) which “shall be the formula of [a] particular emotion” or an abstract concept (Cuddon 2013: 700). The symbol itself, following Henri de Regnier’s observations, is viewed as “a kind of comparison between the abstract and the concrete in which one of the terms of the comparison is only suggested. Thus it is implicit, oblique; *not* spelt out” (Cuddon 2013: 700; italics in the text).

³ According to Andrzej Zgorzelski, each work of fiction has its own unique supercode built out of (and superimposed on) the linguistic (grammatical and lexical) material it utilizes. The rules of

As Umberto Eco rightly notices, the use of symbols encourages various interpretations; the analysis of the symbolic code in a work of fiction should therefore be conducted with due regard to the semantic integrity of the text itself (Eco 1999: 133–134). Without doubt, the pattern of symbolic elements in *The Road* may be individually received, especially that the range of sources which can be referenced is broad, due to McCarthy's choice of universal symbols, and hardly limited by the text itself. This essay shows that, embedded in the foreground (gloomy) picture the reader receives, in the vision of a depressing post-apocalyptic dystopia with its baggage of traumatic experiences, McCarthy's literary symbolism appears consistently ambiguous. Yet, in this, it allows for a subjectively measured dose of optimism – metaphorically speaking, the novel's glimmer of light. Some observations will be made as to the noticeable polarity (a divergence of opinion) in the readers' reception of the novel's overall message caused, as it seems, by this ambiguity. Selected academic responses and reviews *The Road* has received will be mentioned to point to the dualistic nature of McCarthy's narrative⁴. All in all, this essay argues that McCarthy's literary symbolism leaves room for redemption in the world presented by signalling the possibility of rebirth. Therefore, it has the potential to gradually undermine and eventually subvert the initial perception of the novel as entirely pessimistic.

What is also significant in this essay is the fact that the observation of what may be seen as the poetic and metaphysical facet⁵ of *The Road* not only gives an insight into the latest trend in post-apocalyptic fiction, but appears to go beyond its features. The manner in which McCarthy's literary contribution reinforces this trend, while at the same time suggesting new paths of the genre development, is noteworthy.

this supercode are to be gradually reconstructed by the reader from the text itself – see e.g. Zgorzel-ski 1984: 299–307.

⁴ The term: *narrative* used in this essay relates to “the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*; story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented” (see the def. in Abbott 2002: 16).

⁵ In relation to Aristotle's concept of the first philosophy (referred to as metaphysics), which considers the concept of being *qua* being: the ultimate causes and the fundamental principles, the nature of God and that of extrasensory substance (Arystoteles, *Metafizyka*...; qtd. in Nalewajk 2011: 29). See Żaneta Nalewajk's observations about “the uses of metaphysical themes in new Polish poetry,” especially the conclusion that “metaphysical uncertainty challenges poets to search for new means of artistic expression” (Nalewajk 2011: 42) and the assumption that the subject of literary studies is to be identified not so much in metaphysics itself, but in the structure of the poetic record devoted to what the poet regards as metaphysical (Nalewajk 2011: 29). In the whole essay all translations are mine (unless stated otherwise).

***The Road* as a post-apocalyptic novel**

The beginnings of the genre in which *The Road* is rooted may be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, when Herbert G. Wells created a series of science fiction works presenting his vision of the future after a global catastrophe. Wells's short story *The Star* (1897), published in the collection *Tales of Space and Time*, makes a prophecy of mass destruction caused by a cataclysmic collision with a cosmic body. His novel *The Time Machine* (1895) shows the earth perishing in the fading sun, and still another of his novels *The War of the Worlds* (1898) depicts man's hopelessness in the face of a greater force. However, while in Wells's novels and short stories one may sense the author's fascination with scientific discoveries and the limitless possibilities that the advancement of science offers, McCarthy ignores the theme as such and adopts a different perspective. In his fiction there exists only a human being in the ruins of civilization. This is precisely the direction in which the genre developed by the end of the twentieth century. In this regard, *The Road* is more similar to Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), since both works analyze human behaviour in extreme conditions. Both King and McCarthy show the social consequences of mass destruction – the change in the bodies and minds of those who have survived. In both novels two kinds of people are contrasted – those referred to as beasts and those for whom, as it seems, only death may provide relief. Therefore, it may be argued that McCarthy draws on *The Stand*, especially that both narratives highlight, apart from the descriptions of devastated lifeless towns, the motif of a journey and that of dream visions which prophesy a fierce combat between good and evil. It is the theme of this everlasting conflict, combined with the survival of responsible people who retain love and faith, that may be regarded as bringing together King's *The Stand* and McCarthy's *The Road*. Yet the existence of any hope or optimism in the latter novel is still in question. It relies heavily on the reader's recognition and interpretation of its symbolic elements and the various sources they may refer to, which all contribute to its allegorical message. As Ryszard Nycz accurately observes, explaining the notion of intertextuality⁶, although the literary text "itself indicates the existence and scope of its references, what it indicates and how meaningful it becomes depends, to a large extent, not only on the appropriate frame of reference, but also on the analytical inquisitiveness and the variable literary and cultural competence of the recipient" (Nycz 1990: 98).

⁶ Understood as "a category encompassing this aspect of the totality of properties and relations in a given text which indicates the dependence of its creation and reception on the knowledge of other texts [...] in the process of communication" (Nycz 1990: 97).

For the sake of further categorization, it should be noticed that *The Road* represents (as an early example) the currently “growing corpus of post-apocalyptic novels written by authors who do not typically write science fiction” (De Cristofaro 2018: 2)⁷. It depicts “a world that has already been hit by a[n] [...] annihilating event” (Boulard 2013: 61). It is therefore to be associated with other recently published works of post-apocalyptic fiction which reveal various “dystopian post-apocalyptic scenarios” (see De Cristofaro 2018: 2). More precisely, it is “the dystopian post-apocalyptic reversal of civilisation to a more primitive state” that is “a trope of contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions”, from Will Self’s *The Book of Dave* (2006) with its “neo-medieval society” to David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) with its “hunter-gatherer one” (De Cristofaro 2018: 11). On the one hand, *The Road* is said to make “human survival appear [...] highly unlikely” in a manner comparable with Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011). On the other hand, though, the “far more optimistic” tone in some post-apocalyptic dystopian works of fiction, such as Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* (2007) or Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) (De Cristofaro 2018: 11), should not be overlooked as an integral part of the up-to-date trend.

One final remark should be made about *The Road* in terms of McCarthy’s contribution to the development of the genre, outlined only briefly in this essay. While traditional apocalyptic fiction aims to “disclos[e] that the whole course of human history is tending towards a final resolution which will make sense of everything that happened before” (De Cristofaro 2018: 3), *The Road* is “not anymore haunted by an eschatological fear” (Boulard 2013: 61) and signals a different approach. It belongs to the group of contemporary post-apocalyptic dystopian narratives which “implicitly subvert” the very core of “apocalyptic discourse, that is, a sense-making utopian historical teleology (De Cristofaro 2018: 5). This is a turning point which Andrew Hoberek and Frederick Buell describe in terms of a shift from the constraints science fiction has naturally imposed (in its marginal cultural position) to “the mainstream” of speculative literature” (Hoberek 2011; Buell 2013: 9). The very fact that the narrator in *The Road* does not name the apocalypse, neither does he ever reveal what caused the cataclysm (even in the omniscient-mode passages), “in itself challenges the sense-making function of the end” recognized in traditional apocalyptic narratives (De Cristofaro 2018: 20).

⁷ Most of the apocalyptic literature written so far, as Lech M. Nijakowski estimates, is science fiction or political fiction (Nijakowski 2018: 24).

Dualism of the critical response to McCarthy's narrative

The Road is described as a disorienting novel (the feature considered typical of McCarthy's works), causing confusion which begins at the point one has to decide about its setting (see e.g. Mitchell 2015: 208). All that McCarthy's narrator offers in this matter is a brief mention of the nameless country, "barren, silent, godless" and "dead to the root" (*R* 2, 21)⁸. *The Road* shows two lonely and vulnerable figures on their strenuous journey through what is, eventually and only in some sources, recognized as the post-apocalyptic US (e.g. De Cristofaro 2018: 12). All that is initially clear is that the survivors are walking south in search of warmth and food, struggling to survive in the deadly environment, and that "the anonymous father's need is to protect his son, as they scavenge for food and clothing in an anonymous wasteland" (Mitchell 2015: 208). Not only does McCarthy leave the catastrophe unspecified, but he also treats places, characters and dates likewise – they remain unnamed; the "events are unidentifiable as historical episodes" (Mitchell 2015: 227). As Jane Maslin notices in her review of *The Road*, published in *The New York Times*, in this he achieves a specific effect – the narrative appears more abstract, its appeal more universal (Maslin 2006). Also, the perspective of two nameless protagonists: their experiences, sensations and thoughts, expressed as directly as the third-person narration (employed most of the time) may allow, makes the story personal and intimate⁹.

This, in turn, intensifies the predominant imagery of McCarthy's novel: the ruins of civilization, the collapse of "all pre-existing social codes", and the total destruction of the environment (Monbiot 2007). In McCarthy criticism *The Road* is viewed as a "critical dystopia" (see e.g. Ryan 2007). As emphasized in the reviews and academic essays devoted to the novel, McCarthy's narrative brings to the foreground burnt plants and skeletons of birds on the dry ground, cars with corpses dried in the sun, and few mostly hostile survivors – "predators, cannibals" (*Review* 2008). People captured, mutilated and kept in the cellar for meat, human bodies stripped of skin and muscles, people "starved, exhausted, sick with

⁸ In the whole essay, quotes from *The Road* (McCarthy 2006) are marked as (*R* pp).

⁹ *The Road* is complex in terms of narration and focalization. It seamlessly shifts between the omniscient mode and the protagonist's limited point of view (Genette's internal focalization). Furthermore, there are abrupt shifts from third- to second-person narration, e.g. in the scenes of retrospection where the "clipped" imperative is used (see Mitchell 2015: 204). The narrator's invoking the second person is indicative of breaking the fourth wall (218) and, as such, "threatens "the ontological stability of the fictional world" (Richardson 1991: 312). This phenomenon is, though, itself unstable in McCarthy's fiction: it "constantly threaten[s] to merge with another character, with the reader, or even with another grammatical person" (Richardson 1991: 312; Mitchell 2015: 218).

fear" (R 60) who must decide whether to be predators or victims – "the imagery is brutal even by Cormac McCarthy's high standards for despair" (Maslin 2006)¹⁰. McCarthy's "final gesture" in the novel is seen in the mother's suicide: "in the face of no hope whatsoever" (Maslin 2006):

As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness [...] there is no stand to take [...] don't ask for sorrow now. There is none [...] You have no argument because there is none (R 29).

The Road is said to offer "nothing in the way of escape or comfort" and the protagonists' journey along the eponymous road is seen as "the road through hell paved with desperation" (Maslin 2006).

The ecological concern the novel undoubtedly expresses has been appreciated by George Monbiot in his *Guardian* review, where he notices that McCarthy "makes no claim [...] but merely speculates about the consequences" – "considers what would happen if the world lost its biosphere, and the only living creatures were humans, hunting for food among the dead wood and soot" (Monbiot 2007). However simplistic this observation may initially appear, it developed into a specific approach adopted in academic research. Stefan Skrimshire argues the novel "presents the horror of a possible future in order to galvanise a resistance to its fulfilment" (Skrimshire 2011: 12). As observed by Diletta De Cristofaro, "horror and mayhem [...] are [...] at the core of *The Road*'s «borrowed world» [R 130]" with its "sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular", and "people being killed for their backpacks' contents" (De Cristofaro 2018: 12, 13). Overwhelming silence, as further noted, emanates from "an irrecoverable ecosystem that indicates the lack of a utopian renewal after the end [...] and the collapsing of the sense-making order the traditional apocalyptic paradigm projects onto history through teleology" (De Cristofaro 2018: 13). This conclusion seems more than justified in the light of the following passages:

[...] he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable [...] The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (R 67).

The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone (R 14).

¹⁰ John Jurgensen (2009), in turn, notices that the details in the descriptions of violence have an artistic value.

Also Anaïs Boulard focuses on the dominant position of “the theme of «the ruin»” in *The Road* and goes on to argue it may be observed “on different levels”: the “ecological ruin” seen in the “aesthetic of chaos” and the “semantic ruin stuck between the remain[s] of a dead past and the only survivor of a new barren world” (Boulard 2013: 61). She then accurately concludes that McCarthy’s narrative “is a way to express a current fear, but also to dominate this fear by the act of writing” (Boulard 2013: 62), which is perceptible at its very outset in the following sentences:

Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease (*R* 2).

It seems this is precisely what accounts for the duality of expression in *The Road* (the ambiguity of its message): the deep pessimism which stems from the narrator’s depiction of prolonged silence and monotony, on the one hand, and the possibility of rebirth implied by the inclusion of universal symbols and paradoxes, on the other (in this case: water and its potential, the sound of water in silence). As aptly explained by Skrimshire, “McCarthy’s pursuit of life and lives in the scorched wasteland bears all the hallmarks of Nietzschean tragedy – the “taming of horror through art” (Nietzsche 1993: 40; qtd. in Skrimshire 2011: 2).

In order to further consider the dualisms in McCarthy’s *The Road*, leading to its “ambiguity of redemption,” it is worth linking this essay with the interesting observations made by Skrimshire, who argues the novel oscillates between “that which is to come and that which is already upon us” (Skrimshire 2011: 2, 12). This duality of perspective is noticeable, as he says, in the “equally weighted” choices McCarthy’s characters make – “[f]or the boy’s mother, only death offered redemption, and the father’s crime was to deny it to their son” (Skrimshire 2011: 12). It is also visible in the motif of memories – each “persists as a curse as much as a blessing” (Skrimshire 2011: 11–12). As further noticed by Skrimshire, some reviews devoted to *The Road* come “in the form of critique” of the novel’s tone in its conclusion”. They correctly, yet with disappointment, state McCarthy has “failed the modernist challenge: to write about a holocaust, about the end of everything [...] What happens [instead] is a redemption, [...] arguably absurd in the face of [currently] overwhelming nihilism” (Skrimshire 2011: 1; see e.g. Rositer 2008). In other words, *The Road* with its “redemptive” and “messianic” tone is viewed as untypical of the novelist, out of tune with his alleged nihilism (Chabon 2007; qtd. in Skrimshire 2011: 1). Skrimshire balances the above-mentioned distinct perspectives by explaining that *The Road*

interweaves themes both of resistance (the refusal to die) and mourning (the passing of irreversible loss) [and] [i]n doing so, [it] powerfully engages the reader with the very porous nature of redemption in the context of its post-apocalyptic environment. This is because the conversations and thought experiments employed by McCarthy attempt in many different ways to destabilise and provoke questions of the binary oppositions involved in that very discussion of redemptive ends [...] There are oppositions such as the saved and the damned, the lost and the retrievable; the redeemed and irredeemable futures (Skrimshire 2011: 2).

The author observes McCarthy's technique of employing binary oppositions (and blurring dichotomies) and argues it should, in fact, be viewed as a strategy meant to "provoke the question, in particular, of what meaning we might possibly attach to human redemption and the «messianic» in an ostensibly irredeemable *earth*" (Skrimshire 2011: 2; italics in the text). Without doubt, it is various oppositions utilized in *The Road* that contribute to the observed divergence (duality) of critical responses to the novel. McCarthy's strategy, as will further be explained, involves the intricate pattern of various symbolic elements *The Road* reveals from its first pages.

Symbolism: dream visions and the reality of "the waking world"

The very first passages of *The Road* describe the father's dream, where, as the novel later explains, "phantoms not heard from in a thousand years [are] rousing slowly from their sleep" (*R* 59). The dream foreshadows the constant struggle and unalleviated fear experienced by the protagonists and gradually revealed in the course of the narrative to follow. What should be noticed is not only the apparent parallelism between the images in the father's dream and those in the reality of the presented world (its "waking world"), but also the novel's final removal of the boundary between these spheres:

They passed through the city at noon of the day following [...] He kept the boy close to his side. The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day (*R* 6).

In the dream [...] he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand [...] Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast [...] And on the far shore a creature [...] stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders (*R* 2).

Old dreams encroached upon the waking world (*R* 146).

The grey post-apocalyptic landscape the events of the novel are set in, with burnt and lifeless towns, where everything is dry and “covered with ash and dust” (R 2), in the dream smoothly transforms into the interior of a granite beast. The protagonists’ journey along the road is clearly visualized in the dream as a travel along the beast’s stone intestines. The all-permeating cold and darkness to which they are invariably exposed when awakening from sleep: “in the dark of the woods in the leaves shivering violently” (R 59) after “the nights [...] blinding cold and casket black” (R 66) is reflected in the image of the lake they encounter in the dream: “they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake” (R 2).

The graphic depiction of the father’s dream, positioned at the beginning of McCarthy’s narrative, proves its pivotal element. In this McCarthy seems to draw on older literature, ancient and medieval tales (as well as their modern echoes), where dreams are ubiquitous and “very often prophetic” – “their message may be straightforwardly literal or couched in a dark symbolism that demands a decipherer” (Ferber 1999: 63). Frequently considered “sent by the gods,” dreams bear the hallmarks of a vision for the future. Similarly to the situation in *The Road*, it is “often impossible [there] to distinguish between a dream and a vision, which in turn might be either a waking dream (or trance) or a real heaven-sent revelation” (Ferber 1999: 63). The father’s dream vision, with its image of an ancient lake, appears to perform a crucial function in *The Road* – itself having high symbolic value (as a journey into the depths of creation), it also becomes the convergence point of the various symbols that span the entire narrative. In other words, the dream vision that opens *The Road* acts “as a symbol through which the purport of the whole novel is expressed” (cf. George 1973: 143).

The lake: water vs. dryness

The symbolic occurrence of water (the lake) in the father’s dream vision may give rise to various interpretations, from which, however, clear oppositions emerge. On the one hand, in the context of McCarthy’s portrayal of post-apocalyptic reality, water may be associated with chaos, danger and death (cf. Kopalinski 1991: 926), since the image of the lake connotes the state of “being subordinated to powers which [one] can neither control nor understand” (George 1973: 147). The motif of the lake is likewise frequently employed in folk tales, where its creation by evil forces is presented as the consequence of immoral behaviour and God’s wrath (see e.g. *Symbolika jeziora* 2011). On the other hand, though, the clarity of the father’s vision as well as the explicit characterization of the lake as

ancient call for the recognition of “the basic wisdom which the lake proclaims” in its “narrow, circumscribed environment, of “a sense of life and continuity [...] maintained in [it]” (George 1973: 149–50). Taking all these associations into account, one may view the father’s dream as a presage of the forthcoming confrontation between good and evil in the novel’s “waking world” (R 146). What gives *The Road* a glimmer of hope is the observation that the place in the father’s dream is not dry, in contrast to “the waking world”, nor is the water frozen¹¹, so that it retains its primary (ancient) dynamism and potential.

The symbolism of water may be further referenced to multiple sources, and yet its meaning in *The Road* remains vague. This lack of clarity proves functional, as it serves to provoke a dispute over the possibility of rebirth in the post-apocalyptic world presented. In the pre-Socratic tradition, water and fire represent primordial substance from which all matter is made (Scott 2006: 2). It is commonly, and cross-culturally, recognized as the source of life from which all the known organisms evolved. As explained in dictionaries of symbols, water as a universal symbol is essentially dual in nature: it is linked to both good and evil. Yet it carries “truth and wisdom” and its presence gives hope for “transformation [...] [and] healing”. It has the potential to “purify human soul”, and last but not least, as primary matter it brings about a new beginning: “the rebirth of the soul and body” (see e.g. Kopaliński 1991: 926). The presence of water in the father’s dream may therefore be interpreted as signalling a renewal of nature and human society, or, more sceptically, as a small chance for the foundation of a new world. On the other hand, as illustrated in The Old Testament, water may also turn destructive. In the biblical story of the massive flood it becomes an instrument of punishment in the hands of God for the excessive evil spreading throughout the world, and this (great evil in excess) is precisely what creates the plot of McCarthy’s narrative. One needs to bear in mind, though, that even in the biblical story of Noah there are survivors – the chosen ones (*The Book of Genesis* 6.9–8.18)¹². All in all, the very mention of water in the father’s dream vision, the elements of which are closely intertwined with those of the dry “waking world,” provides a significant contrast and is thought-provoking. In effect, the reader gets involved in exploring the alternative options which stem from the duality of water symbolism, and can thereby see a glimmer of light in the otherwise gloomy narrative.

¹¹ Which, according to legend, may connote the victory of evil forces. See e.g. the following utterance in James Thomson’s *Lucifer’s Tears* (2011): “a frozen lake of blood and guilt, formed from Lucifer’s tears, turned to ice by the flapping of his leathery wings”.

¹² See: *Księga Rodzaju. Dzieje początków świata i ludzkości*, in: *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu ...* 1971: 22–28.

The beast: victory and defeat

A cursory reading of McCarthy's *The Road*, without due attention to the details of its dream motif, leaves the impression that the emergence of the beast and its lingering on the other side of the lake merely foreshadow the different perils the protagonists are to encounter. Also in phenomenological perspective, the beast is likely to be seen as an incarnation of evil. Indeed, as Władysław Kopaliński notices, "fantastic beasts have always influenced our imagination [...] in our private nightmares. The effect is probably connected with our emotional attitude to the problem of establishing proper barriers between human beings [...], setting boundaries that guarantee the stability of the universe as an ordered whole [...] Breaking the barriers means a return to primal disorder" (Kopaliński 1991: 645). However accurate this observation appears in the context of the post-apocalyptic reality presented, the full symbolic impact of the father's dream still remains underestimated. McCarthy's narrative not only utilizes the above-mentioned associations, but endows the beast motif with an additional meaning:

He'd been visited in a dream by creatures of a kind he'd never seen before [...] He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own (R 78–79).

As can be seen, in McCarthy's supercode in *The Road* beasts become entangled specifically in the father's task, defined as his destiny: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (R 39).

The beast itself and the shape of its surroundings, as depicted in the father's dream vision, brings to mind *Beowulf* (ca. 725) – an anonymous mythological epic and a representative piece of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) poetry. The widely recognized monster Grendel is presented therein as an embodiment of evil, born out of God's wrath and sent to the underworld:

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
began to work his evil in the world
[...] he had dwelt for a time in misery [...],
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned. (*Beowulf*, l. 86–144)¹³

What further suggests this association is the very fact that *Beowulf* (and the *Beowulf-manuscript* as a whole) also links the evil of the presented world with

¹³ See e.g. *The Norton Anthology* ... (2006).

cannibalism (on this see e.g. Blurton 2007: 35–58) and that the beasts presented therein also dwell in an underwater cave, where the direct encounter takes place.

On closer examination of McCarthy's symbolism in *The Road*, the initial conclusion that both motifs – that of water and that of the beast – signal the spread of chaos, danger and death is automatically counterbalanced by the observation that Grendel persists in slaughtering the Danes, but only to finally be killed by a hero. In this light, in the figure of the father, destined to protect his innocent son, one should notice the characteristics of heroism. Given the blurred boundary between the dream and the reality of “the waking world,” his walk along the “granitic” cave (“where lay a black and ancient lake”) may be viewed as equivalent to Beowulf's search for Grendel's mother in the beasts' underwater lair¹⁴. The recognition of this similarity is significant but the conclusion it clarifies the situation is hasty. First, the beast in the father's dream escapes into darkness and there is no actual confrontation – hence, the evil (chaos, danger and death) it represents proves elusive. Second, the events in *Beowulf* lead to the defeat of the monsters and the hero dies having fulfilled his destiny; yet in the long term his actions lead to a new prophecy of disaster – a vicious circle of evil powered by human sinful actions.

The analysis and interpretation of the symbolic elements embedded in the father's dream is, in fact, tantamount to exploring a series of oppositions or contradictions, which multiply when one consults dictionary entries. As far as the significant shift in connotations is concerned (from entirely negative to more positive), the image of the beast proves similar to that of the lake:

Beasts are traditionally associated with primitive chaos, [...] with inborn instincts that man has to fight with, but sometimes with benevolent external forces that may cause rebirth and lead us in the proper direction [...]. The beast is often [...] the incarnation of hardship and obstacles that one must defeat to turn out to be a hero and gain profound knowledge [...] (Kopaliński 1991: 645–648).

McCarthy's literary symbolism balances perspectives as if on scales. The duality of his message in *The Road* is further revealed when the father's dream vision is referenced to *The Book of Revelation* (also known as *The Apocalypse of St. John*). Referred to as an apocalyptic prophecy, it illustrates the annihilation of an old world and the creation of a new order, which agrees with Skrimshire's

¹⁴ Which, in turn, brings to mind the question of the boy's mother being absent. The symbolism of the beast in McCarthy's narrative can be further considered through references to the role of Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*.

observations concerning *The Road* as a work of post-apocalyptic fiction oscillating between “that which is to come and that which is already upon us” (Skrimshire 2011: 2, 12). It is worthwhile to notice that the former work also incarnates evil in the form of a beast, born out of evil and given the power to defeat saints and rule over every tribe, nation, and language – yet only for a limited time (*The Apocalypse of St. John* 13.1–13.7)¹⁵.

All in all, the symbolic value of the vividly illustrated elements of the father’s dream remains ambiguous – they seem to signal eventual victory (a form of redemption or rebirth) as much as final defeat (inevitable annihilation). Given the initial position of the dream vision in McCarthy’s narrative, one may conclude that the novel is structured, from its very first sentences, to encourage a debate not only on the nature of evil and the likelihood of redemption in the world presented, but also on the very nature of expected rebirth and thus the sense of heroism in the post-apocalyptic predicament, the latter referred to in McCarthy criticism as the messianic in *The Road* (see e.g. Skrimshire 2011: 2).

Light/fire and darkness

The description of the father’s dream, the starting point of *The Road* and the area of convergence of its symbolic elements, reveals still another clash of contrasting phenomena: light and darkness. In the course of McCarthy’s narrative this apparent dichotomy gets entangled with recurring motifs and images and thus persists throughout the whole novel.

As explained by Timothy Scott, light and darkness, when brought together, cross-culturally symbolize “the distinction of creation from [...] primeval chaos” (Scott 2006: 1). *The Book of Genesis* as well as its eastern – Chinese and Indian – counterparts depict “the first work of creation [as] the separation of light and dark” (Scott 2006: 1). Nevertheless, “prior to this separation, light and dark abide as the creative principle in a bi-unity, fused but not confused, corresponding to the principal progenitive pair: Essence and Substance” (Scott 2006: 1; based on Guénon 1981: 164). Accordingly, *The Road* draws a dividing line between light as a symbol of redemption (goodness and hope) and darkness as a symbol of chaos (evil and despair), but only to subsequently blur it in the pattern of its symbolic elements treated collectively.

¹⁵ See: *Apokalipsa św. Jana: Smok przekazuje władzę Bestii* [The Dragon gives power to the Beast], w: *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu ...* (1971): 1407–1408.

The significance of symbolism in the novel is indicated not only in the figurative depiction of the father's dream, but also in its introductory dialogues:

His face in the small light [...] Can I ask you something? [...]
Yes. Of course.
Are we going to die?
Sometime. Not now.
And we're still going south.
Yes.
So we'll be warm.
Yes.
Okay.
Okay what?
Nothing. Just okay.
Go to sleep.
Okay.
I'm going to blow out the lamp. Is that okay?
Yes. That's okay.
And then later in the darkness: Can I ask you something?
Yes. Of course you can.
What would you do if I died?
If you died I would want to die too.
So you could be with me?
Yes. So I could be with you.
Okay. (R 5–6)

The consistent manner in which McCarthy's dialogues are shaped throughout *The Road* – no dialogue tags, strikingly simple questions (in terms of syntax and lexis) and brief responses – serves to foreground the novel's symbols and, in final effect, its allegorical nature. The representative dialogue quoted above, due to its initial position in the novel, sensitizes the reader to a seemingly clear dichotomy of light and darkness, which is then to be systematically observed for its clarity. More specifically, the light of the oil lamp is associated with positive thoughts, sensations and emotions (affirmation, survival – purpose – warmth), whereas its disappearance (the lamp blown out) automatically activates their negative counterparts. The symbolic value of this dichotomy is thereby indicated and, consequently, becomes a phenomenon to be examined throughout the narrative. Also, with the gradual escalation of the novel's depressing tone, light as a symbol – sign – starts functioning as if above all the tragic elements of the presented world.

The already mentioned beast dwells in darkness and flees at the sight of light, which seems designed to foreshadow future events:

Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls [...] And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light [...] It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark (R 2).

The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper (R 146).

Yet the conclusion that this apparent victory of light over darkness in the father's vision is suggestive of redemption in "the waking world" is a risky one. Considering that there is no actual confrontation and that what initially appears the beast's symbolic escape may in fact merely denote a hesitant movement out of sight (the symbolic intolerance of light), the transience of chaos and horror in McCarthy's fictional world remains uncertain and, therefore, its redemption is still a vague concept. This seems particularly true in view of the fact that it is the beast that freely draws on the primeval ("ancient") life-giving source of water while the novel's "good guys" (R 66) are exposed to the dryness of the outside world.

It seems McCarthy's selection of symbols serves to illustrate not only the eternal fight between good and evil, which involves clear-cut categories, but, more precisely, the inseparability and mutual permeation of these categories. In other words, the symbolic veil of *The Road* – the pattern of its symbolic elements which, due to their universal nature, engage a broad spectrum of references – seems designed to break the reader's deeply entrenched dichotomous way of thinking.

The novel's 'glimmer of light' constantly reappears in the reader's various associations. It transcends the boundary between the dreams and the reality of the presented world, taking both physical and metaphorical forms. It literally continues glimmering as the light (lamp) in the hands of the two protagonists, who persist in defining themselves as those carrying the "inside" (spiritual) fire. In both forms seemingly brittle, delicate, it unceasingly penetrates the darkness of the post-apocalyptic world, literally and symbolically. The act of carrying the fire becomes the novel's main metaphor and, as such, touches upon the notions of ultimate good, divinity, faith, and the messianic mission. Its maintenance is synonymous with sustaining the hope for the emergence of a new organized world.

The motif of carrying the fire may be associated, yet again in McCarthy's narrative, with the concept of rebirth after a period of annihilation. Reflecting old folklore beliefs, the novel's symbolic fire is said to be of divine origin and seems to convey the idea of purification through destruction (Kowalski 1998: 371–378), a process inevitably followed by new fertility and the re-growth of life. Likely to have been further inspired by old myths, the fire symbolically carried throughout

The Road appears indispensable for any hoped-for fundamental change (cf. 371–378). Delving even deeper into the area of the past, one should also recall the well-known truth – “carrying the fire and its constant maintenance were crucial for Stone-Age people” (Kopaliński 1991: 509–510), and so are they in *The Road* with its sudden reversal of the world to its most primitive form. “This dependence on fire resulted in its cult” (Kopaliński 1991: 510), as much then as in McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world.

Referring to the ancient (pre-Socratic) philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, one may say what is being symbolically carried in *The Road*, through the ruins of the reality presented and in defiance of its destructive influence, is “the principle of the world, pre-substance [...] primary matter, pre-element from which Nature had developed, which became the sea, the air, the soil, and which finally turned back to its initial form of fire” (Kopaliński 1991: 509–510)¹⁶. When the assumption is that destruction and death are the phenomena preceding restoration, the symbolic act of carrying the fire, repeatedly emphasized by McCarthy’s protagonists, indicates the turning point at which the matter of the world is brought back to its primary and thus potentially creative state (cf. Kowalski 1998: 371–378):

And we’re carrying the fire.
 And we’re carrying the fire. Yes.
 Okay. (R 66)
 Is it real? The fire?
 Yes it is.
 Where is it? I dont know where it is.
 Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (R 145)

The father’s determination and his relentless efforts to sustain “the fire [...] inside” the child – to protect his life and innocence – are to be viewed symbolically as his contribution to preserving the potential of rebirth.

Allegory: “good guys” carrying the fire and “bad guys” on the road

The novel’s distinction between “the good guys,” persistently carrying the fire, and the “bad guys” (R 39), who are met on the road and constantly put the endeavour at risk, is, as it initially seems, clear-cut. It is based on the criteria which

¹⁶ According to the Stoics, fire is “the God-given element [...] the cause of motion, life and the variety of material shapes” (Kopaliński 1991: 509–510).

appear striking and quite shocking to the reader, yet are taken for granted by the child:

We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
 No. Of course not.
 Even if we were starving?
 We're starving now [...]
 But we wouldnt.
 No. We wouldnt.
 No matter what.
 No. No matter what.
 Because we're the good guys.
 Yes. (R 65–66)

In these appalling post-apocalyptic conditions that drive survivors to cannibalism, the father persistently replies: “yes” to the fundamental question posed by the child: “Are we still the good guys?” (R 39):

And we always will be.
 Yes. We always will be. (R 39)

Such exchanges of succinctly worded assurances are scattered in the narrative and may be received as the novel's glimmer of hope. They add up and, altogether, give *The Road* an oxymoronic aura of positive emotions in the trauma.

The allegorical sense contained in the novels' title becomes evident: “The Road” is to be seen as a process, a journey towards redemption fuelled by hope, by a distant faint ‘glimmer of light.’ The factors to be juxtaposed are the boy's innocence and his vulnerability, the father's relentless messianic attitude and his deteriorating health, the symbolic act of taking over the father's task by a stronger “guy” met on the road (a hunter better adapted to the situation and still another father “carrying the fire [...] inside” his children) and the perils in which the same symbolic road still abounds.

It is also significant that McCarthy's narrative preserves the traditional family unit. Not only does it reappear as a motif at the very end, giving the novel a compositional frame and a cyclical structure, but it grows from the initial image of broken bonds and despair (the mother's withdrawal and suicide) to the final image of wholeness and reassurance (with an emphasis on the mother's contribution):

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God [...] She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time (R 149–150).

It seems the symbolic fire cherished by “the good guys,” who prove to share the same attitudes, consolidates and becomes more resistant to the dangers of the road.

In the context of the world devoid of any previously well-established social codes, the special bond between father and son must be perceived as impressive. It signals the preservation of basic principles and needs instilled in human nature. The figure of a gentle little boy who tries, at all costs: “No matter what” (*R* 60), despite his fear, hunger, and extreme tiredness, to remain a “good guy [...] carrying the fire,” who covers his father’s dead body with a blanket, despite the piercing cold he feels himself, who cherishes his memories and faith, who remains grateful and values human life to the very end, is designed to dispel the gloom of the otherwise ruthless world:

The boy sat staring at his plate [...] Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God (*R* 74).

[...] I wont forget. No matter what [...] He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget (*R* 149–150).

The figure of the boy thereby assumes the proportions of the novel’s main symbol. He carries an inner light – his inner goodness and innocence are protected at the beginning of the narrative, throughout it, and, even more effectively, in its closing passages. The death of the past in McCarthy’s fictional world entails thinking about its future possibilities, “fresh and uncontaminated” – this is the “principle of historical truth” (Mitchell 2015: 220). The figure of the boy represents these possibilities and thus “link[s] the father’s past with humanity’s future.” The son “represents not simply his progeny” but should be viewed in a universal sense as the “standard against which [the father’s] own and others’ lives might be measured, in place long before the boy came into that life” (Mitchell 2015: 220).

McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* exhibits the features of an allegory. The gentle fire “inside” the child is viewed as divine; his breath is called “the breath of God [...] pass[ed] from man to man through all of time” (*R* 150). It is portrayed as delicate and vulnerable and, therefore, as one that has to be guarded. The figure of the father is consequently also symbolic. He is the guardian of the fire, destined to protect the divine element, the potential capable of initiating, out of chaos, the foundations of an organized world. Its protection is given priority; it is defined as the essence of the father’s (and later the family’s) existence. Yet,

paradoxically, at the same time it requires his readiness for an atrocious crime – the sacrifice of the guardian’s conscience. The novel foregrounds paradoxical circumstances and illustrates the historical truth in which an act of atrocity is justified:

He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke (*R* 3).

This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire (*R* 37).

In the image of an anonymous father – the guardian of life who has just taken somebody’s life – McCarthy’s narrative once again disrupts what initially appears to be a clear dichotomy of good (innocence) and evil (guilt), synonymous with that of light and darkness. Referring to Scott’s observations on the symbolism of light and dark, it can be concluded that in *The Road*

[i]n the final analysis the distinction between light and dark is the “illusion” of duality. The “dark” Substance, the *materia prima*, is from a certain perspective identical with the “light” Essence [...] What is being described in both instances is the sense of undifferentiation, formlessness, potentiality, purity and unity (Scott 2006: 2).

In this, it seems, one may identify still another reason behind the discernible ambiguity in McCarthy’s narrative. On its allegorical level, it illustrates more than just “a substance preceding the creative act” (Scott 2006: 2). In fact it illustrates “the first content of creation”. It personifies “the active demiurge being the centre, and its passive complement, the periphery. This two-fold demiurge constitutes the creative power in the midst of creation itself” (Schuon 2000: 52–53).¹⁷ The “fire inside” the boy promises “the expansion of light within and upon darkness [and as such] expresses the measure of Creation” (Scott 2006: 3).

At this point it is necessary to re-evaluate the symbolic value of the father’s dream vision with which *The Road* begins. As the point of convergence of all the aforementioned symbols and their common associations, the father’s dream can be seen as a symbolic entry of the father and son (“pilgrims”) into the very centre of creation, “where the child led him by the hand” (*R* 2). As Scott notes, *The Book of the Zohar* depicts the act of divine creation as “throwing down a precious stone [...] that sank into the abyss” (Scott 2006: 3) – and the cave McCarthy’s protagonists “wandered in” is presented, which is significant, as “inward” and “granitic” (*R* 2). In more literal terms, yet still reflecting the concept

¹⁷ Qtd. in Scott 2006: 2.

of “the Essence-Substance complementarity” (Scott 2006: 3) in the novel, one may say that the father-son relationship “embodies a tension between pragmatic self-preservation and innocent morality” (Mitchell 2015: 259). What should be observed, regardless of the perspective adopted, is that the father’s sacrifice and the son’s humanity “lend an unmistakable religious tone to the son’s summary claim: “I am the one” (Mitchell 2015: 259).

However, the possible observation that faith in God is preserved: passed from father to son in McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic fiction, remains a matter of debate. It is, on the one hand, supported by the father’s messianic mission and the child’s attitude and, on the other, simultaneously undermined by what appears to be the father’s crisis of faith:

Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God (*R* 6).

The questions regarding divine presence, intent, responsibility, and mercy are raised in the father’s private talks to God and can be understood as expressions of doubt. The motifs of faith and doubt are also intertwined in the passage quoted earlier, where, on closer observation, one may notice a certain tension between what is attempted and what is actually achieved by the son: “He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him” (*R* 149–150). What was initially viewed as an increase in faith (added value) now may appear its permanent decrease (loss).

The ending of the novel, through the dualistic and paradoxical nature of the impression it leaves, encourages further debate on the issue of redemption – the influence of human conscious activity on its realization becomes the subject of reflection. The assiduous nurturing of the primary divine element is seen as crucial throughout the whole narrative but, at the same time, the amount of randomness (and luck) in the novel’s (conventionally designed) denouement is indicative of limited control. The fire, it may seem, burns invariably and “no matter what” (*R* 60). This allegorical message, in either case evoking hopefulness, is then promptly confronted with the novel’s “stunning and cryptic” (Josephs 2013: 141) last paragraph, which evidently breaks the fourth wall and appears surprisingly descriptive, in contrast to McCarthy’s narrative as a whole:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand [...] (*R* 150).

It cannot be accidental that the last short passage, said to be beautiful yet “the most damning” (Phillips 2011: 186), compresses so many different forms of water, at the same time emphasizing its dynamism and life-giving potential:

[...] On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (*R* 150).

McCarthy purposefully, as it seems, selects a sample of the natural environment abundant in water, only to conclude it has been lost irretrievably. The impact of this final statement on the reception of the novel’s overall tone is profound: it severely undermines the hopeful message one may have seen in the novel’s denouement (see Hoberek 2011: 497; Mitchell 2015: 226) and in its so-far uncovered allegorical dimension.

In the very last sentence *The Road* once again operates in its sphere of allegory, clearly linking, through the mention of “deep glens” and “things [...] older than men”, the picture of living streams with that of the “ancient lake” in the father’s dream vision. Speaking vividly and figuratively about plentiful water, it foregrounds its limitless potential, and definitely does it only to elegiacally mourn the irreversible loss – of the environment known to mankind (see e.g. Hoberek 2011: 497; Mitchell 2015: 226). In this manner *The Road* receives one more compositional frame, embracing that which bears the motif of family survival. The frames may be read in their entirety as the novel’s withdrawal of the promise of life or, still differently, as a promise of life yet in a habitat where the nature of the potential change is beyond human knowledge: beyond the “maps of [our] world in its becoming” (*R* 150). The concept of rebirth in *The Road*, considered at various stages of its analysis, remains vague – in the last words of the novel, it “hum[s] of mystery” (*R* 150).

The function of colours

The mutual permeation of opposing spheres is additionally illustrated in *The Road* by means of symbolically contrasting colours. As they correspond with the novel’s symbolism of light and darkness, they likewise characterize the survivors and foreshadow future events. When the boy spots a bearded hunter, towards the end of the story, the latter is “dressed in a gray and yellow ski parka” (*R* 147). This makes it problematic to classify him as either one of the “good guys” carrying

the fire or one of the cannibalistic “bad guys”. In effect, the consequences of this encounter are unclear and, but for a while, the tension increases and the narrative reaches its climax. Apart from the suspenseful uncertainty as to the man’s intentions, this clash of colours conveys a more universal message. It points to the fusion of the above-mentioned opposites in the survival-of-the-fittest situation. It thus symbolically characterizes the effective guardian of “the fire” carried “inside” the child.

In McCarthy’s narrative greyness and darkness signify devastation and this relates not only to the landscape of the post-apocalyptic world, but also to the atrocities imprinted in the mind. Against the overwhelming greyness in the description of the surroundings, any contrast sparsely introduced by the narrator appears significant. Colour black is reduced to a mere “streak” on the child’s fair cheeks: “The sunken cheeks streaked with black” (R 49) and, in this, one should recognize the father’s success – the fulfilment of his destiny. The boy’s potential – “the fire [...] inside” him is, in turn, symbolically represented as a “golden chalice” and, as such, must be guarded like treasure: “He [...] stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god” (R 38). As Lydia Cooper also notices, “the slow flush of colour spreading through the grim darkness of the novel [...] seems to counter the father’s increasingly despairing interior world, suggesting [allegorically] that the son may possibly succeed in bringing the ‘fire’ of sacred meaning back to the emptied vessels of his universe” (Cooper 2011: 149).

In the reality which looks “like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (R 2), where “everything covered with ash” and “dust” (R 11), and “nights dark beyond darkness” (R 2), the yellow colour of the guardian’s (hunter’s) jacket is easily noticed, and so does the light of the lamp, constantly carried by the father, and “the boy’s face sleeping in the orange light” (R 49). The warmth of these images arouses hope, additionally strengthened by the child repeatedly saying: “Okay”, “Yes. Okay”. The light continues flickering in McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world: “No matter what” (R 60) and its subjectively perceived intensity translates into how one evaluates the likelihood of redemption and the very nature of rebirth in the reality presented.

Iconicity: the impact of McCarthy’s minimalistic style

McCarthy’s ascetic style in *The Road* proves functional. Not only does it correspond with the post-apocalyptic theme, in the manner which constitutes an interesting

example of iconicity in literature,¹⁸ but also emphasizes the “symbolic details camouflaged in the novel” (*Recenzja* 2008). It is the universal nature of McCarthy’s symbolism, thus accentuated, and the wide range of references associated with it, that make *The Road* a literary phenomenon which Lee Clark Mitchell describes as “register[ing] the triumph of narrative.” In McCarthy’s novel, as Mitchell further explains, “the mystery of words [...] in fragile formulations and equivocal evocations keep alive the possibilities of stories themselves” (Mitchell 2015: 205). The loss of resources in the world presented is reflected in the lexical layer of the narrative almost devoid of ornaments – “nature’s demise has withered language itself [...] antecedents and motivations shrivel in the shrivelling of language itself” – but, even if in *The Road* “words disappear with their referents, or otherwise die out from disuse, the narrative pulse of the novel resurrects possibilities” (Mitchell 2015: 208, 209).

In her review, Jane Maslin accurately observes that *The Road* “becomes a relentless cautionary tale with *Lord of the Flies*-style symbolic impact, marked by a dark fascination with the primal laws of survival.” As she further notices, “much of its impact comes from the absolute lawlessness” of the world presented (Maslin 2006), which corresponds to the “lawlessness” in terms of the novel’s punctuation and syntax. John Jurgensen describes McCarthy’s style as “muscular prose stripped of most punctuation” and at the same time notices “his painterly descriptions of violence” (Jurgensen 2009). All things considered, McCarthy’s minimalism in *The Road* contributes to the authenticity (iconicity) of the text, on the one hand, and the poetic impact of the message, on the other. The novel appears harsh and crude yet, in fact, it “hypnotizes the reader with its quality of being brittle and delicate” (*Recenzja* 2008). Its own language, as it seems, “challenges the very nihilistic logic that it gives representation to” (Bell 1988: 128)¹⁹.

Also Ashley Kunsza argues that “it is precisely in *The Road*’s language [its veil of symbolism and allegory discussed in this essay] that we discover the seeds of the work’s unexpectedly optimistic worldview” (Kunsza 2009: 58). She then rightly notices that the specific function of the novel’s language consists in “set[ting] both [the] characters and readers free from the ruin” (Kunsza 2009: 65) of the presented post-apocalyptic world. As Mitchell explains, *The Road* is “a dystopian novel that registers the end of culture [yet] becomes through its varying linguistic register a testament to cultural renewal itself” (Mitchell 2015: 205).

¹⁸ In relation to Tabakowska 2006: 9; iconicity defined as the unity of theme and structure, the agreement between the sense of a given utterance and its construction.

¹⁹ From Vereen M. Bell’s observations about McCarthy’s earlier novel: *Blood Meridian*, published in 1985; qtd. in Mitchell 2015: 206.

What deserves particular attention in *The Road* is the manner in which McCarthy tries, similarly to Emily St. John Mandel in her *Station Eleven*, “to cast a certain spell through the rhythm of [his] prose” (McCarthy 2014)²⁰. The novel magnetizes the reader with “its narrative rhythm of temporal ebb and flow, of flashbacks and dreams amid present consciousness,” skilfully tuned with its “stylistic swings amid prose registers” and its “fragmentary exposition sliding into rich lyrical outbursts” (quotes from Mitchell 2015: 206). In the context of post-apocalyptic fiction, the poetic quality of McCarthy’s style appears unique: it goes beyond the so-far established features of the genre.

Conclusion

In its symbolic and allegorical dimensions, which may be viewed as an alternative platform of added-on meanings²¹, *The Road* encourages a debate on the issues of redemption and rebirth in the post-apocalyptic world presented. Its pattern of symbolic elements, carefully selected for their dual message, extends from the first to the last paragraphs, which, due to their parallelism, constitute the double thematic and compositional frame of the narrative. At its very beginning and end, the novel (seen as a cyclical structure) compresses its key symbols, which then echo throughout the whole narrative and modulate its tone. Within this framework, the novel multiplies various contradictions (recognized as dualisms, oppositions, dichotomies and paradoxes) which result from the universal character of the adopted symbolism. All of this appears a well-planned strategy meant to gradually reveal the novel’s allegorical message and, through its vagueness, arouse controversy.

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* unfolds a narrative which juxtaposes its frequent mentions of despair, as well as its numerous descriptions of irreversible social and environmental destruction, with its range of ambiguous symbolic elements that persist in the text, are highlighted by the minimalistic language, and thus constantly encourage the reader to consider alternative options. In terms of novelty, in the context of other contemporary works of post-apocalyptic fiction, one should

²⁰ From an interview with Emily St. John Mandel on 12 September 2014; qtd. in De Cristofaro 2018: 2. As noticed by De Cristofaro (2018: 12), “*The Road* is a recurrent point of comparison for *Station Eleven* in academic analyses and reviews alike” (see e.g. Tate, 2017).

²¹ See Sławiński 1978: 9–22, on the levels of space in a literary work, including the layer of added-on meanings – additional meanings superimposed over the spatial representations or “connotations with a more or less clear symbolic character” (Sławiński 1978: 21).

regard the sophisticated manner in which *The Road*, with its seemingly simple style, balances the two spheres of its narrative and thus encourages the debate not only about the issue of redemption and rebirth in the post-apocalyptic world presented, but also about the influence of conscious human activity on the future of the world²² in more general sense. The significance of these spheres depends on the reader's perceptions and analytical skills as well as their different expectations and attitudes. This is precisely what constitutes the artistic quality of *The Road* described by Maslin as the balance between the novel's "pure misery" and "its stunning, savage beauty" combined with "fearless wisdom" (Maslin 2006).

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²² Which is itself the theme traditionally introduced in post-apocalyptic fiction; compare, e.g. Steven King, *The Stand*; Marek Baraniecki, *Cassandra's Head* (1985); Nevil Shute, *On the Beach* (1957); Andrzej Ziemiański, *Autobahn nach Poznań* (2001).

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