

Mercy and Hope in Cormac Mccarthy's *The Road*

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Article History

Submitted: 25.02.2019

Accepted: 25.06.2019

Published Online: 30.06.2019

Key Words

Mercy

Hope

Post-Apocalyptic

The Road

Fire

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* frames post-apocalyptic future and a world without color and time. McCarthy gives us a devastating prophecy that covers a violent world where humanity has lost its meaning and a nameless catastrophe has achieved to create nothingness. He creates a wasteland where only real values have the chance to survive and despite the materialistic elements that have gone, he stresses powerful values- mercy and hope. *The Road*, though depicts the brutal activities of people even eating each other, emphasizes the burning light inside human being as the only hope for the reconstruction of civilization, and the essence of human light is considered the only weapon to destroy darkness. Despite the tragic events, raising the awareness that the survival of values peculiar to human being have disappeared, McCarthy handles how humanity may be saved via humanitarian features. The aim of this study is to present how mercy and hope are given as the source of future life and at the same time to display these themes as the humanistic values which have not disappeared yet. Additionally, the study aims to present the author's views regarding how life and even the existence of humanity may be under a serious threat without hope and mercy. Since these issues are significant, McCarthy prioritizes them for the betterment of humanity which is about to come to an end. Bu bağlamda, makale yazarın perspektifinden merhamet ve umudun vazgeçilmez kavramlar olduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.



DOI: 10.9761/JASSS8012

Reference Information / Atıf Bilgisi

Tanrıtanır, B. C. (2019). Mercy and Hope in Cormac Mccarthy's the Road. *Jass Studies- The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, Number: 75, Aumner, p. 163-170.

*Cormac Mccarthy'nin Yol Romanındaki Merhamet ve Umut Temaları***Doç. Dr. Bülent Cercis Tanrıtanır**

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Makale Geçmişi

Geliş: 25.02.2019
Kabul: 25.06.2019
On-line Yayın: 30.06.2019

Anahtar Kelimeler

Merhamet
Umut
Kıyamet Sonrası
Yol
Işık

Öz

Cormac McCarthy' nin Yol romanı kıyamet sonrası bir geleceği ve renk ve zamandan yoksun bir dünyayı resmetmektedir. McCarthy insanlığın anlamını yitirdiği şiddet dolu bir dünyayı kapsayan yıkıcı bir kehaneti sunmakta ve isimsiz bir felaketin hiçliğe sebep olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Yazar sadece gerçek değerlerin hayatta kalma şansı bulduğu çorak bir yer yaratmış ve yitirilen maddi unsurlara rağmen güçlü değerler olan merhamet ve umut temalarına vurgu yapmaktadır. Birbirlerini yiyen vahşi insan faaliyetlerini konu alıyor olmasına rağmen, Yol romanı medeniyetin yeniden imşası için insanoğlunun içinde yanmakta olan ışığı tek umut olarak ele almakta ve bu ışığın özünün karanlığı yok etmekte tek silah olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. İnsanoğluna özgü değerlerin yok olduğu izlenimi uyandıran olaylara rağmen, Mccarthy insan oğlunun insancıl özellikler aracılığıyla nasıl kurtarılacağını ele almaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, merhamet ve umut temalarının gelecekteki yaşamın kaynağı olarak nasıl yansıtıldığını ve sunmak ve aynı zamanda bu temaları hala yok olmamış insani değerler olarak göstermektir. Bununla beraber, bu çalışma yazarın , insanlığın ve yaradılışın bile umut ve merhamet kavramları olmadan nasıl tehlike altında olabileceğiyle ilgili görüşlerini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Adı geçen kavramlar önemli olduğundan dolayı, MaCarthy sona ermek üzere olan insanlığın iyiliği için bunları önceliklemektedir. In this regard, the article aims to present the inevitability of mercy and hope from McCarthy's point of view.



DOI: 10.9761/JASSS8012

Introduction

Throughout history there has been a close bond between nature and mankind and this bond has sometimes been depicted through ecofictional style. Ecofiction as Jim Dwyer describes; may be nature oriented, which covers non human orientation, or environmental oriented focusing on human impacts on nature. Being popular in 1970s ecofiction gave rise to a new movement that connected humanity and nature. Not only has it connected both nature and humanity but also enabled literature to reflect the happenings in nature. Moving from the fact that everything is connected to everything else, the physical world and culture coexist and cannot be accepted as independent concepts. Literature, as a part of culture, attempts to reveal human relationship to nature at the same time, it provides alternative ways to contextualize nature and human interaction not only to provide knowledge about the dependence of each sides but also raises awareness of the disastrous effects of human activity on environment. We as human beings have altered everything around us so dramatically that nature has lost its feature as an independent force and more tragically we can observe our desires in every meter of it and because of our greed nature has lost its original essence that's why, it is reflected as a dominant character ravaging human existence in some catastrophic forms.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, fictionalized as environmental oriented novel, tackles the ruinous effects of post-apocalyptic future pointing out the ruthless approach of human being to environment. Yılmaz defines climate change human oriented and she considers it a concept defying the entire world's system (2015:584). Gifford defines the novel as written in a form that asks questions regarding a radical survival in an apocalyptic context (2013: 10). Everywhere is destroyed and covered with gray dust symbolizing the end of life. *The Road* (2006) is set in a deserted land where post-apocalyptic humanity is reflected as desperate. Although the book is silent on the nature of the disaster happened a few years ago, its results are obvious since no plants grow, no animals survive except for a small dog. It is not possible to get to know the result of the catastrophic event as it is not completely mentioned and without having adequate knowledge it is hard to define the event as climatic. Fires and ash attribute to volcanic eruptions as well as a nuclear blast that ravages the world where populations burn up. Having the clues pointing out a nuclear winter the novel is regarded as eco-fictional although we are not sure about the disastrous impacts of climate change.

Presenting the last remnants of humanity, McCarthy portrays two figures calling them "good guys"(McCarthy, 39). The novel begins the boy's and his father's journey in the woods. The boy is asleep whereas the man is awake being worried about his son. Although the date and place are unnamed, the reader can infer that the setting is somewhere in the United States as the man narrates that they are walking the "state roads" (McCarthy, 22). Neither the boy nor the man is given a name by the author since he intends to state that such a desperation could happen to anyone anywhere.

In this apocalyptic work, McCarthy indicates that the new world contains no or limited amount of electricity, running water and even humanity. The novels portrays two good guys embarking on a journey which is the thematic feature. In fact, most of McCarthy's novels involve riding, walking so his characters like father and son in *The Road* are men of the road. Written in modern time, *The Road* frames a world lacking a living nature and morality. The world is surrendered by constant threat called cannibalism and civilization is no longer existing. The ruined world, as ecocritics mention, attributes to contemporary environmental crisis. Within this crisis, the boy is the only one the man worries about. The man, believing that he has been given the mission to protect the boy, knows that the boy is all he has. Surrounded by gray air and land, the man and the boy set out to and make their way to south expecting a better life though the man is aware that he has no reason to hope that a better life awaits them there. During their escapist journey, they have a cart filled with their belongings and supplies. The man, who is always in search of something to eat and find a place to shelter, is fighting a bad cough

causing him to spray blood. They encounter cities, towns completely different from how they were before. The remnants of the past world remind the man of the life he once lived and his wife who deserted both the boy and him to escape from the cannibalistic world presumably by committing suicide. The theme of suicide is apparent in the novel as it is implied that the man's wife ended her life and the man carries a pistol with two bullets to kill his own son to prevent torture should road agents find them.

Mercy and Hope as the elements for rebirth. *The Road* portraying catastrophic elements from the beginning, includes mercy and hope as the source of living. As Hacibektasoglu and Kartopu state mercy is a term referred in theology, philosophy, sociology and in many fields (2017:204). One can come across a gloomy view described as "dust and ash everywhere" (p. 2) but mercy and hope are for the continuity of human being too. For this reason this study will focus on how mercy and hope are presented as the source of living in the novel. The boy and the man defined as "good guys" (McCarthy, 2006: 39) constantly encounter other people on their way to south. One of the men they meet on the way is a burnt man struck by a lightning. His clothes are scorched, one of his eyes is burnt, his hair and his skull are covered with ash like the whole country. Upon seeing the man sitting in silence with shoes bounded up with wire, the boy desires to help him as much as they can.

What is wrong with the man?

He has been struck by lightning.

Can't we help him? Papa?

No. We can't help him.

The boy kept pulling at his coat. Papa? He said.

Stop it.

Can't we help him Papa?

No. We can't help him. There's nothing to be done for him.

They went on. The boy was crying. He kept looking back. (McCarthy, 25)

Being merciful, the boy does not want to leave the burnt man behind to endure his desperate destiny. He knows that the man will either starve or be eaten by cannibals. *The Road* as Wielenberg mentions; "has obviously turned the hearts of the man and the child to each other" (Wielenberg, 2010: 2) but the father's inability to help the burnt man resents his child and he stops talking to his father. Traveling through barren, silent and the godless country the son and the father are desperately searching for food in order to survive. The world is fading into oblivion and decaying without any morals. The novel is distinctive as there is not a proper time and Strand points out the meaningless of keeping a calendar as; "it has no use to keep a calendar in a world where everything has lost its meaning" (2012: 7). Even people, dead or alive, are eaten and the remainders are brutalized. "Good guys" with their cart arrive in a city in which they are met with eternal ash again. "they stood in the street. He looked at the gray sky. Faint plume in their breath. The boy was exhausted". (McCarthy, 2006: 39) In search of something to eat and dress to wear they see sour smell of the dead and nothing else instead. In this hopeless situation, the boy hears a dog barking from a long distance and warns his father about the sound.

What was that?

I didn't hear anything. Listen

I don't hear anything. They listened. Then the distance he heard a dog bark. He turned and looked toward the darkening town. It's a dog he said.

A dog?

Yes. Where did it come from?

I don't know. (McCarthy, 41)

The boy knows that a living creature- no matter what it is- is an attractive source of food in the town where hunger peaks so he begs his father not to hurt it and allow it to survive. "We're not going to kill it, are we Papa? No. We are not going to kill it. He looked down at the boy. Shivering in his coats. He bent over and kissed him on his gritty brow. We won't hurt the dog, he said. I promise". (McCarthy 41) The man pities the dog and he keeps his promise not to slaughter a creature to appease their hunger. Unlike other remnants, who consider everything as a source of food to continue their lives, the boy and the man let the tiny dog survive ignoring their irresistible desire to feed. The close bond between the father and the son is presented successfully throughout the novel. The journey to south covers both dangerous and didactic incidents. In some circumstances, they face road agents trying to kill them but sometimes we witness how the man teaches his son to swim and float. The moment they come upon a waterfall is a clear evidence that the man has a very strong link with his son like it was in the old world. The father cares for the boy and worries about what will happen in the future under uncertain circumstances. For this reason, when the boy sees another one in a street and runs after him his father holds him by the hand and prevents him from seeing the boy at his age. Despite the uncertainty of their future and the danger he might be in, the boy enthusiastically wants to see that stranger and cries for him without knowing him. As a young boy, he is given as conscientious so he sobs. The reality that it is almost impossible for a small child to survive in a brutality dominated world makes him broken-hearted. "I just wanted to see him Papa. I just wanted to see him. The man took him by the arm and they went back up through the yard. The boy would not stop crying and he would not stop looking back. Come on, the man said. We've got to go" (McCarthy, 43). Both the dog and the little boy the father and son came across deepen the boy's grief as he is not sure whether there is someone to care of them or not. He constantly asks questions to his father in order to make sure that the poor boy has Papa to take care of him. He is so afraid for the little boy that he puts the blame on his father's shoulders for not getting the boy and the dog. "We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us. We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat. We can't. And I'd give that little boy half of my food. Stop it. We can't" (McCarthy 44). The "good guys" press on enduring harsher conditions like more rain, cold and hunger. They meet another house and the father feels something strange under his feet. He immediately digs the ground and notices a plywood door in the ground. In spite of the boy's insistent begging, the man persuades him that good guys should keep on trying. The man's efforts result in finding a hidden bunker filled with supplies and canned food, water and cots. The two guys spend their days in the bunker eating and drinking. The man realizes that they were about to starve but upon discovering the bunker they could have the chance to survive once more. The boy, on the other hand, is sorry for the people who had to leave all these things and wishes that they are not dead but safe and peaceful in the heaven.

Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and of you were here we wouldn't eat no matter how hungry we were and we are sorry that you didn't get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God. (McCarthy, 74)

Strand states that; " at the heart of the novel, lies the paradoxical state of a world without anything in it making any progress" (2012: 10). It is apparent that the current conditions of the post-apocalyptic world is catastrophic and the last remnants are preying on each other just like beast creatures. There is nothing worth living but a belief for a more humanistic life in South. In the devastated world, the father's effort is praiseworthy as McCarthy establishes the father and son love as an indication of survival. Schaub agrees that " *The Road* is unique in locating the basis for meaning in the father's love for his son, and even suggesting that this meaning transcends the father's efforts to affirm and protect his son's life" (Schaub, 2009: 2). It is such a strong love that the father is persuaded

by his son to share their food with an old man Ely. Despite the fact that they have limited amount of food they help Ely and it is a manifestation of the boy's mercy.

In the end, he didn't get much. Some cans of vegetables and of fruit.

Finally, the boy just went over to the edge of the road and sat in the ashes. The old man fitted the tins into his knapsack and fastened the straps. You should thank him you know, the man said. I wouldn't have given you anything. (McCarthy, 90)

Though the journey looks a physical one, it exhibits the features of a spiritual one as well. It begins from an immoral, godless life to a more moral and humanistic one. Humanity has lost all its values and pre-apocalyptic world is lost and the formation of a new world is uncertain. McCarthy portrays the world as exhausted, abandoned and faded but the affectionate approach of the boy to the survivors gives clues for a better world in the future. An unnamed thief tries to run with the cart belonging to the man and his son but when he is noticed he struggles not to give the cart back. Once he sees the pistol directed to him he steps back and the father threatens to blow his brain out. The scene forces the boy to beg for the thief's life. The boy does not want his father to kill the man as he screams like "Papa please don't kill the man" (McCarthy, 133). Not only does the boy ask for mercy for the thief but also requests his father not to leave the thief naked and foodless. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* does not only display how merciful the little boy is but also the hope for a new life based on happiness and humanity. After losing her wife the man has only one person-his son. Throughout the novel, the author struggles to motivate the child and invokes the notion that carrying the fire is vital in order to remain alive. Symbolically, the fire keeps them warm and cooks their food. In fact, it symbolizes the continuity of civilization. On one side, it is one of the elements that caused destruction in the world but on the other, it keeps the seeds of civilization which will be brought back by the efforts of only good guys like the man and the child. It is clear that, rebirth of the civilization depends on the survival of the good especially the child's. That's why, beginning from the child's birth, the man is aware of the inner fire and inspires the child not to give up even when he dies. Since carrying the fire and being good are interrelated, it is obvious that only good guys carry the fire whose existence proves that a civilized life will appear again as it did before. The man mentions that the child has been the one who has always had the fire. "It is inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (McCarthy 145). In the world of *The Road* what distinguishes the good guys from the bad is that good ones do not eat people but the bad eat. Along with not stealing, lying and giving up, helping others and keeping promises are the principles the man is trying to teach and throughout the novel we witness how the man and the child are trying to do what is right in a world where most of the people have abandoned humanity and morality respectively. The man hit by an arrow dies but his child kneels beside him and promises not to give up saying; "I'll talk to you every day, he whispered. And I won't forget. No matter what" (McCarthy, 149). The boy considered as a holy object is the source of light to the man and the light manifests his determination to survive and make civilization dominant again.

The father's attitude to his son, from the beginning, is to construct a meaning from the inside as it was before. After the father freed his son from the grasp of another man by killing him, he cleans the dead man's brain from his son's face in order to wipe out the traces of cannibalism. The father, whose wife chose the suicide as an escapist way to avoid rape and the risk to be eaten, devotes his life to his son uttering; "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" (McCarthy 37). In McCarthy's world, in which past memories are destined to oblivion, there are significant promises given belonging to the man. Although he sometimes breaks his promises to the child, he swears that he will never leave his son even in death. When the man is about to pass away, the child begs his father to kill him. "Just take me with you. Please" (McCarthy 45). The father finds himself unable to kill his own son and see him dead

in his arms but suggests another solution instead. He tells his son that as long as the he practices they will be able to speak despite his death. "You will have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you'll hear me. You have to practice. Just don't give up. Okay?" (McCarthy, 145). After the man dies the child promises his father that he will talk to him every day and he keeps it. The man's promise not to leave his son and child's promise to continue speaking to him are as Wielenberg states "interwined". (2010: 5) Thus, the man who cannot keep all his words, does keep his most significant promise. Being loyal to what they have said to each other, we conceive that the bond and love between a man, who considers the protection of a child a mission, and a child, who stands as the fire of humanity, will always survive." And I won't forget. No matter what " (McCarthy, 49).

McCarthy presents such a gloomy world in which no light is shining in the beginning. The darkness in the world is like a strong star shining. Ironically shining darkness is almost impossible to be destroyed by the postmodern society. It can be overcome by true love. According to Deco the darkness can be destroyed only through "awaken human soul that burns inside every human being" (2013: 1). In the novel, the true love and light seem lost and darkness, the cause of which is nuclear catastrophe, is penetrating into our world. The hopeful journey of the man and child ends with the death of the father that arouses the impression that mercy and hope have faded but it results in a new pursuit of humanity and love. The child is about to commit suicide with the last bullet in the pistol. On seeing a man carrying a shotgun over his shoulder, his fear doubles and assumes that he is also eating others. To restart humanity, love, life that's to say to create a rebirth, the man is characterized as a good guy and he wants the child to join his family consisting of his wife, son and daughter. The child realizes that there is nothing to be done for his father but these affectionate people are the ones with whom he will continue his journey.

He waited in the road and when the man came out of the woods he was carrying the suitcase and he had the blankets over his shoulder. He sorted through them and handed one to the boy. Here, he said. Wrap this around you. You're cold. The boy tried to hand him the pistol but he wouldn't take it. You hold onto that, he said. (McCarthy, 148)

The encounter of the family with the boy is not coincidental but a destined one as they say that they were following them. The motherless child has an affectionate woman who will help him to carry the fire inside him. She shows her pleasure to see the child by putting her arms around him and holding him." I am so glad to see you" (McCarthy 149). The child loses his father but he keeps his perseverance as he is not left alone and it is somehow implied that the hope will perpetuate for the reconstruction of civilization.

Conclusion

The *Road* is McCarthy's work written in simple style encompassing simple vocabulary that is opposed to our complicated World. It is understandable in terms of reflecting McCarthy's view of sketching destructiveness of postmodern life. The future of human life is in danger and civilization is almost to disappear. As a fictional novel, *The Road* makes us, as ordinary readers, aware that the world is devastated by global crises like terrorist scenarios, nuclear winter, and earthquakes leading the humanity to reposition himself in the ruined World. It reminds the readers that we as the residents of the World are also walking on the final road where life will disappear. As an eco-fictional work, *The Road* demonstrates apocalyptic world dominated by catastrophies but on the other hand, it enables its readers to grasp the essence of fire embodied by mercy and hope. Mercy and hope as the fundamentals of the world representing the constant struggle with dark postmodern world. The dark era is symbolized as ravaged by fires, snow, rain gray dust and it is changing, yet, the father in the novel is trying to activate humanistic values inside his son. He never gives up lighting the fire the child needs to

survive and adapt the changing conditions of the world. Despite the ruinous change, the child would remain the same and have the essence without losing the humanistic values. In each time, we see that the son, preserving the values of mercy and hope, keeps the essence of humanity to stay truly human and continues to seize the will to live. Cormac McCarthy emphasizes the necessity of relying on one's inner capability to survive by embracing humanistic virtues. At the end of the novel, we have the hope that everything will be reestablished. McCarthy does not give the answer of what would happen after the boy's departure with the new family but he is conscious of his inner potential to continue his life as a real human. Moreover, McCarthy lets the old World disappear and frames a new life with a new generation symbolized by the arrival of the new family.

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