

# “The Frailty of Everything”: Memory, Meaning and the Paradox of Language in Cormac McCarthy’s Post-apocalyptic World

Jane Ladefoged 

“He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He’d had his feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality.” (McCarthy 75)

A man and his son wander through a dark and eerie landscape. An unknown catastrophe has ruined the known world and a new, sinister one has emerged from the ashes. In the ruthless and savage post-apocalyptic world, they rely entirely on each other, but simultaneously, they are alone. The man, who was born before the catastrophe, and the boy, who was born after, come to realize the stark contrasts between them, which are a result of their different pasts. Their common place is the post-apocalyptic world and they both attempt to make sense of this world, which none of them are truly familiar with.

Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006) takes place after the world has seen its end. The novel portrays the remnants of a catastrophic happening, a world in which the very world we know so well has been cut down to the bone, to mere “parsible entities”, and so has the language that McCarthy uses to portray it. The focus of this paper is language, memory and experience, as these are intricately connected and substantial for understanding the complications of the post-apocalyptic world. The paper starts by defining the distinct characteristics of the minimalist writing style to establish a broad understanding of the genre. Hereafter, the paper turns its focus on *The Road* and characterizes the man and boy with emphasis on memory, experience and language. The relationship between the man and the boy is investigated with particular focus on their way of communicating in the post-apocalyptic

world. The paper proceeds to discuss minimalistic features in regards to the novel and investigates in which ways the novel conforms to minimalism and in which ways it is atypical for the genre. I then examine what effect the distinct writing style has on understanding the narrative. Finally, I examine and discuss how language and memory become paradoxical in the post-apocalyptic world. The boy and man are significant for understanding the interconnections between past and present, but the novel in its entirety is also a necessary and inevitable component in understanding the paradox of language and memory. The paper argues that *The Road*, in its encounter with readers, becomes an ironic work, because readers subconsciously engage their own memory, experiences and connotations to make sense of the post-apocalyptic world, although the post-apocalyptic world is foreign and in many ways incompatible with the world that readers know.

### **The ambiguities of literary minimalism**

When Ernest Hemingway proposed his theory of literary minimalism, he described it as following: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (Ammary 53). He elaborated by using the iceberg as a metaphor: “The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water (...) you could omit anything you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (54). Minimalism as a literary writing style is, as portrayed above, characterized by its use of omissions; it leaves out aspects of the story it depicts to attain a particular effect. This in itself is paradoxical: how can a writing style be defined by something that it is devoid of?

As illustrated through Hemingway’s description, the concept of omission and the iceberg theory are closely linked. Omissions do not simply mean that, as a minimalist writer, one can choose to leave out certain parts of the story in the writing process. The seven-eighths of the iceberg are still present – within the mind of the author, they are carefully considered and thereby connected to the narrative. The parts are thus implicitly present; to the reader they are hidden and must be uncovered. Omissions can both be understood as concrete parts of the story that are left out, as for example the lack of motive for a certain character’s actions. They can however, also take the shape of concrete empty spaces in the text. These vacant areas, the seven eighths, leave space which the reader has to fill out.

The language of minimalism is, as the name implies, scarce and therefore seemingly straightforward. Paratactic, declarative syntax is what is most commonly used and subordinating conjunctions are rare (Trodd 9). These relatively simple linguistic features create a distinct effect where all sentences seem to function as equal elements on a list. This recital induces what is referred to as linguistic democracy, which renders “all images, the clear and the skewed alike, with equal conviction and delineation” (Saltzman 425). Evidently, this listing makes the sentences seem staccato and abrupt, and “(...) seem to stammer or bark” (Trodd 9). Both of these factors make way for the reader to construct an interpretation.

The form of narration used in minimalist literature is often third person. The use of third person can naturally distance the narrator from the events and the characters, which leaves room for reader interpretations, as events and characters naturally become more complex and thus more difficult to unravel. Characters, furthermore, are often very scarcely described (Clark 105), and personal traits are generally exposed not through thoughts and rich inner lives, but mostly through actions and speech. Senses are not commonly illustrated either, except from visual descriptions, which are often greatly detailed, albeit meanings and connections behind them generally remain unexplained. This causes the reader to function as an observing, objective camera-eye (Trodd 8).

Since the writing is seemingly objective and straightforward, it might be tempting to assume that a minimalist text is easily read and digested. Subsequently, one could argue that it is possible to read minimalist literature in the sense that it is only *read*, and not translated or interpreted in any way, because its straightforward nature makes it easily intelligible. The minimalist technique with all of its characteristics, however, suggests and underlines how important a constituent that the reader is. As stated above, Hemingway claimed that the writer must “write truly”, but as Johnston argues, the writer is not the only one with a task; the reader must also read truly (69), meaning that great effort must be invested in reading the text. Thus, the reader’s role becomes significant, because he or she must put together all the fragments that constitute the narrative and assemble them into a meaningful whole. The reader thereby becomes implicated in the narrative (Clark 104) and must take active part in making sense of the connections between the words. When the connections become assembled, “[e]vents pile up and the result is a sense of eyewitness” (Trodd 14). This witnessing is complex, because the use of ‘linguistic democracy’ contributes to a feeling of fragmentation (Clark 108). This fragmentation occurs due to a lack of “linear progression” (108), which emerges due to the objective, list-like diction. The narrative curve thereby appears to stagnate, and it becomes necessary for the reader to determine the value of each sentence and the relationships between them. Not only must they ascribe value to the

words on the page, they must also ascribe feelings to them – feelings that they, themselves, experience while reading the text. Thereby, the reader’s interpretation of the story become dependent on how it is decoded, and, as Trodd argues, the reader thus gives the story a three-dimensional quality and thereby provides a new angle (17-18).

Minimalist literature poses some curious problems. One must consider whether is it relatively easy to read minimalist literature or if it in fact is more demanding than one might initially presume. Some academics argue that “less is less (...) [m]inimalist fiction so boils down the world, the argument runs, that it loses the broth“ (Saltzman 423). This impression is misleading however, considering what is required of a reader of minimalist fiction. When so relatively little is elaborated in a text, it is extremely important that the wording is precise. This calls for readers who prioritize concentration over attenuation (431), because “plot pounces from everywhere. Every instant is a mystery, every inch a milestone. To blink is to miss a history” (427). This is an important point, which proves that less is not necessarily less; that minimalist fiction depends upon thorough examination and that it in fact should be read as carefully as poetry (Clark 107). Minimalism hence works by utilizing the relationship between presence and absence (Trussler 2), which positions the reader on an interesting and delicate balance, because interpretation becomes extremely challenging when no straight answer is provided directly by the text. As Trussler puts it, “a narration that is hollowed out by silence, a narrator who is often mute about causation and reticent regarding detail – the reader’s attempts at interpretation must necessarily be provisional” (5). This is an important detail, as the characteristics of minimalism consequently enforce different understandings and thereby induce uncertainty about the ‘true’ meaning of a given text. The features of the genre will be further illuminated and elaborated as the paper proceeds to analyze Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* through the scope of literary minimalism.

### **The alien of the lost world and the native of the new**

“No list of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later.

All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you”

(McCarthy 46).

In *The Road*, we are introduced to two main characters; the man and the boy – father and son. The man naturally feels incredibly protective of the boy and will do everything to keep him safe. In a post-apocalyptic world, however, this is no easy task, as taking care of himself alone is hard enough in a

world so brutal and ruthless. Parenthood, within the post-apocalyptic world that is presented in the novel, is extreme in many ways; everything is a potential threat and the world is unpredictable and foreign. This places an enormous responsibility on the father, because he wishes to protect the boy from all of this danger and frightening sights: “Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that. You forget some things, dont you? Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget” (10). Memory, as we will discover, is a peculiar and complicated term in the post-apocalyptic world.

The extremity of parenthood is portrayed in several ways throughout the narrative. For example, after killing the road-rat, the man “lifted [the boy] over his head and set him on his shoulders and set off up the old roadway at a dead run, holding the boy’s knees, the boy clutching his forehead, covered with gore and mute as a stone” (56). Hereafter, he must clean the boy: “This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. This is my job” (63). These two scenarios both display regular, mundane routines that are distorted into absurdity. Carrying a child on one’s shoulders is usually associated with amusement and joy, but in the novel, the custom is a necessity in escaping a cruel death. Helping a child get clean is likewise connected to something enjoyable, a routine that cultivates tenderness and intimacy between child and parent. Scenarios associated with safety and delight thus become misconstrued in the post-apocalyptic world.

The man’s position in an exterminated world entails brutal truths about his own existence. He has to accept that the world has been boiled down to absolute necessities, and he is forced to disregard the things that are not essential any longer:

He’d carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver’s license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on (43-44).

The four items in the paragraph are listed according to linguistic democracy; their individual meaning appears to be of equal worth. Nonetheless, money, credit cards and a driver’s license are all items that with certainty are of no use in the post-apocalyptic world. The picture of his wife, however, carries different connotations, because it represents a real person with whom he shares specific memories.

Because these differences are not explicitly asserted by the narrator, readers must invoke their own feelings to assert them.

The man continually reflects on his identity, because he simultaneously is a being of the old world and of the new. He is positioned in a kind of limbo; at once battling greatly with his remembrance of the old world while having to accept the grim fact that it is gone. This causes a feeling of homelessness within him because he, in a way, belongs in neither worlds. The old world is physically inaccessible, only to be found in his memories. The new world is recognizable in the way that it still carries resemblances of the old one, only it is abandoned, decayed and covered in ashes: “They trucked on along the blacktop. Tall clapboard houses. Machinerolled metal roofs. A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City” (18). Although the man sees recognizable traits everywhere, the post-apocalyptic world is so different that it is not discernible enough for him to feel at home in. As Godfrey argues, “[h]e simultaneously creates both an intimate and decipherable landscape and a picture of terrifyingly unknowable terrain” (169).

His situation causes him to have dubious feelings about his recollections. As seen while visiting his childhood home, the man at times longingly dwells in his memories. At other times, however, he implies that he wishes he had no memory at all: “He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds” (McCarthy 15). Memory thus overwhelms him with emotions, both good and bad. He is

rendered helpless, completely unable to read the landscape since there is almost nothing here left to read. The father has difficulty perceiving this world and the new truths of the landscape – which include its endless grayness, and the ash that covers everything – but this difficulty in perception is more emotionally draining because he still retains his inner perceptions and memories of the ‘truths’ of the old world. (Godfrey 166)

Looking back on the old world temporarily makes him feel at ease and he cannot suppress the memories. Consequently, when his subconscious brings him back to the new world, the contrasts between them stand even stronger, making it more distressing for him to accept the truths of his new life.

For the boy, the concept of memory functions in a completely different way. The boy is a child of the post-apocalyptic world; he has never experienced life as it was before. The father has memories that spark a temporary feeling of ease, but since the boy has no recollection of better times, he must

accept the world as it is. For him, there is no old or new world, there is only the current world as he experiences it. Because of this, the old signs of civilization that they meet along their way are not recognizable to him. They are incomprehensible and therefore create a strong feeling of unease in him. When the man comes across his childhood home, the boy reacts strongly:

Are we going in?

Why not?

I'm scared.

Dont you want to see where I used to live?

No.

It'll be okay.

There could be somebody here.

I dont think so.

But suppose there is?" (21).

The boy's immediate and assertive "no" is imperative for understanding his memory. For the father, the house represents civilization and safety, because he remembers that it used to have this function. For the boy, houses are not safe; they are hiding places from which potential dangers can suddenly emerge, because this is all that his own experiences have taught him about houses.

The post-apocalyptic world is much barer than the past world. This applies not only to concrete, physical items, but also to more abstract concepts such as ethics, humanity and language. For the boy, all of these concepts should be unfamiliar, but not all of them are. The boy has a strong moral compass that he continually employs: he worries greatly about people they meet along the way and has an incredibly generous and inclusive demeanor. This occurs for instance when they come across another boy:

I'm afraid for that little boy.

I know. But he'll be all right.

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 cant.

And I'd give that little boy half of my food (73).

This seemingly innate goodness is particularly interesting, because it is unclear from where it originates. Since the boy has never experienced anything other than the cruel, barren post-catastrophe world in

which goodness is seemingly nonexistent, how does he know how to be virtuous? The man is the only person that the boy is familiar with, and it is thereby in him that the boy reflects himself. Therefore, the man attempts to educate the boy by telling him stories:

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true. They don't have to be true. They're stories. Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people (225).

In many cases, the boy is remarkably more concerned with general ethics than his father is. According to O'Connor, this conflict descends from the boy and father's different perceptions of past, present and future. He argues that

[t]he moral force of the boy emerges precisely because he is not of the present, and ultimately not of the father's lost world (...) the boy demonstrates that the future is as much a part of the present as the past it. Memory cannot revel in a lost past, in an immaterial psychological recollection, but to be real, memory is dependent on the reality of the past and prospective material traces. (9)

The man remembers a world where people used to be good; the boy has never experienced such a world. When the boy listens to the father's stories and compares them to their own experiences, he realizes that these two do not correspond. For him, the stories could arguably represent a moral to strive for, but when the man fails to execute them, it becomes the boy's obligation to try to do so. Throughout the novel, the man constantly reassures the boy that they are "the good guys", although the boy believes their doings are often unnecessarily cruel. Conceivably, the man's belief that they are good is a necessity for his own mental health. When the boy confronts him with the discordance, the man is forced to realize the brute truth of the post-apocalyptic world – that very little is left of benevolence.

The boy has a profound desire to obtain knowledge. Since the old world is unknown to him, he constantly questions the father about all things and everyone:

"So how many people do you think are alive?

In the world?

In the world. Yes.  
 I dont know. Let's stop and rest.  
 Okay.  
 You're wearing me out.  
 Okay" (205).

Since the boy has no recollection of past conditions, he reacts with an immediate and unsurprised acceptance of the status quo. This bewilders the father, who tries to shield him from as much agony as possible: "Take my hand, he said. I dont think you should see this. What you put in your head is there forever? Yes. It's okay Papa. It's okay? They're already there. I dont want you to look. They'll still be there (...) He looked down the road and he looked at the boy. So strangely untroubled" (161). The boy witnesses a number of appalling scenarios: A group of people are held hostage waiting to be eaten by 'the bad guys', a man attempts to kidnap him and a group of people kill their infant in order to survive. Nonetheless, he manages to keep going, keep asking and trying to make sense of the world. He is "[a]lways so deliberate, hardly surprised by the most outlandish events. A creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end" (50). The description "perfectly evolved to meet its own end" is particularly interesting in light of the father's struggles with death. Since he is not trapped between two worlds, like the father, the boy's understanding of life and death is arguably simpler. Extremely brutal and appalling certainly, but simpler nonetheless. The boy understands the concepts of life and death because his life is a constant reminder of the two: they are always looking for ways to survive, always looking for ways to escape death. When the father attempts to explain concepts like Christmas, trains and telephones to him, and the result is a bewildered boy. He has no understanding of everyday things that fall somewhere in between life and death and therefore seem futile in the post-apocalyptic world.

The man and boy both seek meaning through explorations of past, present and future, but their searches remain unfulfilled for different reasons. The boy does not know where to find meaning, because nothing the man tells him about the old world seems to resonate with him. If it manages to resonate, he is left in an unbearable state of uncertainty in trying to wrap his head around what used to be and what that loss signifies for *him*. With this comes a brute realization: The man's stories of the past reveal that the two have very little in common, and the stories thereby contribute to a strong feeling of alienation within the boy. The man on the other hand seeks for meaning in his past, but remembering the old world makes him feel his loss even stronger; he is alienated because he *has* a past in the pre-catastrophic world.

## Communicating in a world gone by

The man and the boy have a very close relationship. They have only each other and are “each the other’s world entire” (5). They are, however, extremely different. In more ways than one, the man represents the past and the boy represents the future and thus “within the diegesis of the text, the action takes place within the pocket of time that the man and the boy have in common: their present” (Stark 74). Attempting to share information about the old world, the man tells the boy stories about his childhood: “This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy (...) On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didn’t” (McCarthy 22). This moment offers important insight about both the man and the boy. The man longs for the past, and his longing, in this case, overshadows the fact that entering his childhood home might be dangerous for them. The boy, however, is the one who manages to think straight in the situation by asserting that they should leave, as he feels unsafe in the unknown house. Furthermore, the man mentions Christmas, electricity and homework – three things that the boy has never encountered and thereby are futile elements. Instead, he feels alienated by them and reacts with anxiety. The house, an old sign of civilization, comforts the man but distresses the boy.

When the man tries to teach the boy about the past world, it is often ineffective, because so many terms and items are meaningless in the post-apocalyptic world. For example, the man wants to delight the boy by spoiling him:

He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola. What is it, Papa? It’s a treat. For you. (...) It’s bubbly, he said. Go ahead. He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It’s really good, he said (...) He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let’s just sit here. It’s because I wont ever get to drink another one, isn’t it? Ever’s a long time. Okay, the boy said. (19-20)

For the man, and for the reader, the Coca Cola has meaning – it is familiar, comforting and carries specific connotations. The boy however, has nothing to associate Coca Cola with, as he is “unfamiliar with many of the ideas, experiences, material goods, and even language that define contemporary American society (...), Coca-Cola is just ‘a treat’. But for the man and the reader it fizzes with nostalgic reminiscence” (Mavri 9). This difference in recognition is significant because, for the boy, the coke is

a treat and nothing more. He has no comprehension of what coke used to signify, he knows it is a treat only because the man tells him so. Therefore, the man's attempt to spoil his son in a world deprived of enjoyment becomes relatively ineffective.

The man also tries to engage the boy in childlike activities and attempts to lighten the mood on the road by using humor. He does this for instance by pretending to use a telephone: "He crossed to the desk and stood there. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father's house in that long ago. The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said (McCarthy 6). He also

made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn't sure what these might mean to the boy. After a while they just looked out through the silted glass to where the track curved away in the waste of weeds. If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again. (152)

Because the boy is unable to contextualize a phone or a train, the man's effort is unsuccessful and what remains left for them both is an involuntary acceptance of the world slowly withering away in front of them. Memories of the old world constantly linger in the back of the man's mind, regardless of him wanting them there or not. The boy, on the other hand, has no recollection or deeper understanding of the old world. This means that the man can share his memories with him, but the boy's missing recognition instills a feeling of alienation and desolation within the man.

This lack of recognition happens not only when the man tries to amuse the boy, but also when explaining seemingly simple details, such as "I've got to go for more wood, he said. I'll be in the neighborhood. Okay? Where's the neighborhood? It just means I won't be far. Okay" (80-81) and "I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies. As the crow flies? Yes. It means going in a straight line" (132). The boy has no knowledge of either neighborhoods or crows, and the man must either try to explain these terms to him and thereby pass on his memories or accept the fact that crows and neighborhoods will never exist again. Regardless of which option the man chooses, he is confronted with his past – the boy's ignorance is a constant reminder of what previously was. Their way of communicating reminds them both of the distance between them, and the man realizes the alienation that exists in their relationship:

He'd been visited in a dream by creatures of a kind he'd never seen before. They did not speak. He thought that they'd been crouching by the side of his cot as he slept and then had skulked away on his awakening. He turned and looked at the boy. Maybe he

understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect (129).

The boy's continual inquiries indicate his strong interest in trying to understand the man's past. His reactions to them however, expose a distorted grasp, because they seem unfitting to the man – and also to the reader. Although his reactions seem deficient, they might not be as accepting as they seem:

“Did you have any friends?”

Yes. I did.

Lots of them?

Yes.

Do you remember them?

Yes. I remember them.

What happened to them?

They died.

All of them?

Yes. All of them.

Do you miss them?

Yes I do.

Where are we going?

We're going south.

Okay” (50-51).

Having lost all friends to death is a gut-wrenching scenario, and the boy's reaction seems bizarre because it indicates two explanations, both of which are alarming. Either the boy is so traumatized by the post-apocalyptic world that he does not have the ability to express the agony that he feels when the man discloses new truths to him, or he truly does not comprehend what the man tells him. To him, having friends is so difficult to imagine that he does not fathom the man's loss. The man thus, no matter the scenario, is alone in dealing with his memories and his grief.

Although the man struggles greatly with his past, he acts as though it does not exist: “Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad” (46). The man claiming “there is

no past” is extremely paradoxical, as he himself is altogether unable to separate past and present. Arguably, trying to convince the boy that there is no past is a way for the man to try and spare him from the grief and dread that his memories create within himself. However, the man’s memories also become a source of anguish for the boy.

### **Is there no past?**

Although the man claims that there is no past, this paper has characterized the man and the boy through the scope of literary minimalism with particular emphasis on memory, language and experience. *The Road* conforms to the theory of literary minimalism in several ways. As seen above, omissions are used both physically and in terms of content. Considerable amounts of white space surround the words on the page, which leaves concrete spots for the reader to fill in. These spaces “compel the abeyances, reversals, and shifts in direction that reinforce this general discontinuity – indeed, that make reading the novel similar to reading a poem, asking the reader to pause and reflect, to slow the tempo, to contemplate silences in the text” (Mitchell 210). Furthermore, the novel rarely provides explanations for the actions and words of the main characters. This is most amplified in the boy’s use of “okay”. The boy’s immediate acceptance of their circumstances is, more than anything else, characterized by his intense use of this particular word, which functions as a response to almost everything – regardless of the question:

Are we going to die now?

No.

What are we going to do?

We’re going to drink some water. Then we’re going to keep going down the road.

Okay. (74)

Although the man paradoxically mentions that “okay means okay” (139), the word is highly ambiguous and therefore works on several levels. As Mitchell argues

Serving as phatic discourse more than actual exchange of information, ‘okay’ becomes an intermediate term, resonating as neither right nor wrong (...) ‘the word itself carries different connotations. At times it’s a questing for permission, at other it’s a pressing of will, but most often it’s a pleading call for existential reassurance – another ritualistic call and response that serves to reassure that the two are physically and psychologically safe’. (222)

The ambiguity of “okay” is challenging because it means that readers must pause and evaluate all of them. Furthermore, it is even more challenging to interpret its meaning when it is used to display acceptance of absurd situations that are opposite of what one would normally define as being “okay”. In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* however, Mitchell argues that the word is elevated and that its familiarity is necessary for a feeling of security. The use of “okay” thus, more than anything, exemplifies the importance of the active reader.

As mentioned, minimalism tends to use third-person narration to create distance. The form of narration in *The Road* however, is somewhat unclear:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (110)

At the beginning of this paragraph, the reader appears to witness the world from the perspective of the man. However, the so-called camera-eye appears to zoom out and observe the boy and the man from a distance, which causes them to resemble animals on the run. There is thus a “blurring of perspectives between narrator and protagonist” (Collado-Rodríguez 62), which creates a feeling of confusion while reading the paragraph and contributes to a sense of fragmentation in the overall narrative. What the passage signifies, is not explicit either. Accordingly, the writing style of the novel is not always straightforward, but often “tends toward the fragmentary, with normal parts of speech dropped, other usage distorted, lending to sentences a bizarre cadence and immediacy, sometimes generating strangely gnarled meanings” (Mitchell 210). This distinctive combination of apparent straightforwardness and complexity confirms that McCarthy’s style is not solely minimalistic. Both styles however, call for attentiveness and because the distinction between the styles remains unexplained – there is no explicit discrimination between them – they become of equal importance in understanding the overall narrative and readers must evaluate them individually.

The fragmented feeling in the novel stems not only from the mix between minimalistic and more perplexing passages, but also in the way that McCarthy uses, or chooses not to use, certain linguistic features. The novel is devoid of quotation marks, it uses limited commas and contractions are used only in certain words: “He’d been ready to die and now he wasn’t going to and he had to think about that” (McCarthy 121). As seen in this sentence, and as Banco notes, contractions are omitted only in

negations (277). Thus, “by including the apostrophes, McCarthy signals that which is perhaps most painfully removed from this world: anything that posits, anything positive (...) It reminds us, by way of a small, often easily overlooked mark, of what must be remembered and what is most at risk” (277). The omission of quotation marks thereby contributes to this loss, because it “reminds readers that there is little left in this world outside these two characters – little left from which they require demarcation” (277). Thus, the novel’s scarce use of punctuation contributes to a feeling of detachment while also mirroring its theme of loss.

The feeling of fragmentation is perplexing and disorienting – feelings that seem familiar. Arguably, parallels can be drawn between the writing style and the mental state of the father. The varying writing technique creates

disconcerting breaks themselves in narrative time and consciousness – the alternation between present and past, reality and dream, dread and desire. The novel, that is, disrupts chronology in ways at once confusing yet enabling, even familiar, but also turning the screw, collapsing perspectives as well as transforming conventionally sequestered scenes of consciousness (...) Flashbacks, memories, dreams: all regularly disrupt the narrative flow in a fashion that nonetheless makes the narrative come alive, forcing us to concentrate on sounds and images that reflect the man’s mood of puzzlement, anxiety, disjointedness. (Mitchell 211-212)

Not only the man, but the reader too battles with making sense of past and present and feels the same disjointedness, which contributes to a deeper understanding of his character and of the complications of the post-apocalyptic world. We come to understand the man’s profound feeling of loss, and we, like him, struggle greatly to process the things that the man and boy experience.

The majority of the novel is written in a strictly factual and descriptive manner. This contributes to a feeling of absence: a novel that deals with very brutal and extreme themes seems to require concrete unravelling and aiding illumination of its topics – one could argue. Because the novel seems to lack explicitly illustrated emotions, the themes appear even more strikingly barbaric. In other words, the writing style cultivates an intense contrast between form and content. The seeming lack of emotion somewhat distorts the reading, because the content seems to crave an explanation or an acknowledgement of the brutality that is portrayed. For example, when the man and boy come across the road-rat, they have a short, hostile conversation: “What are you eating. Whatever we can find. Whatever you can find. Yeah. He looked at the boy” (McCarthy 54). Seen in isolation and without

reflection, the connection between what to eat and gazing at the boy is easily overlooked. The association however, is highly important, as the road-rat is saying that they eat whatever they can find – humans. Saltzman’s argument that “to blink is to miss a history” (427) is thereby both ideal and completely fundamental for understanding the importance of the active reader in *The Road*.

Another example of compressed brutality is the basement with the hostages: “Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (93). No explicit explanation is given as to why the people are being held hostage and why a man’s leg has been cut off and burned. As a reader, one must pause the reading and dwell for a moment on the words. When the grim realization hits, the effect is incredibly powerful. Readers, when assembling the fragments of meaning, create powerful and truly disturbing images in their minds. Furthermore, being forced to dwell on the passages, “constrain the reader to spend more time and effort on interpreting the text and thereby to feel the weight of meaning more heavily” (Snyder and Snyder 35). This proves that when readers project their own emotions onto the narrative, they come to feel more than they understand – just as Hemingway argued.

There is a duplicity in the novel’s lacking justification for the themes it portrays. “Pervading the novel is an abiding sense of loss”, Mitchell argues (208), which is clearly displayed in the very theme of the novel. At first, it might seem as though the contrast between form and content is vast, but when it comes to the themes of loss and absence, form and content are in fact closely linked. Although it is implicit, the novel constantly reminds readers of the past and forces them to confront it. There are multiple examples of the conflict between past and present. For example, when the man and the boy find a house, they are described as wandering “through the rooms like skeptical housebuyers” (McCarthy 174), and the man at one point describes the boy as looking “like an orphan waiting for a bus” (231). These examples are paradoxical, because terms and concepts from the past help the reader understand the world of the future. Without subconsciously induced illustrations, the reader would be lost in the unfamiliar post-apocalyptic world. The novel is saturated with these kinds of examples, and in fact, the majority of the novel relies on the reader’s own experiences and memories. The previously mentioned scenario with the boy on the man’s shoulders (McCarthy 56) depends completely on the reader’s associations with this particular practice. Had the reader no recollection of what it usually signifies to carry a child on one’s shoulder, the absurdity that the novel portrays would be lost.

Thus, not only *The Road*, but the entire post-apocalyptic genre as a whole poses an enormous paradox. The post-apocalyptic genre tells the story of what happens *after* the end. How does one

explain a new, unknown world without using references of the old one? How can one even successfully apply words from the old world to describe the new one, when the two worlds practically have nothing in common?

Apocalyptic events cannot be adequately represented, for we lack the means to symbolize them. Instead, we project our (eschatological) anxieties and inferences from the past onto the future. 'Everything after the end, in order to gain, or borrow, meaning, must point back, lead back to that time.' Post-apocalyptic fictions, then, are not foresights but retrospections; not revelations but replications – oblique or explicit – of past fears, traumas, and memories. (Mavri 3-4)

This argument is valid for both the man and the reader, but how does it resonate with the boy, who has experienced nothing but the post-apocalyptic world? For him, terms, items and notions from before the catastrophe are hollow, because they generate no connotations in his mind. Trying to fathom what is and what has been lost is inconceivable and leave him in an ever-present state of perplexity and agony. The man continually tells him stories, but what meaning can the boy obtain from them? For him

such tales are suspect because they do not mirror his reality and thus hold no validity (...) 'This provides the father with another existential challenge as at times he is unable to evoke 'the richness of the vanished world'... for the boy as it slowly fades from his memory, and he experiences a philosophical dilemma ... as he agonizes over how he can possibly 'enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own'. That the boy cannot produce narratives with 'happy endings' draws attention to the profound achievement of the novel in making us 're-think our understanding of language.' It exposes the problematic relationship between language and reality – that without immediate referents in the existing world, words are empty signifiers. (8)

As discussed above, the man feels isolated because his recollections are futile to the boy. For the boy however, the feeling of isolation is equally strong, because the man's stories feel so intangible and thereby unreal to him. For the man, goodness has vanished, but he tries to hold onto it through the stories, But for the boy, stories about 'good guys' hold no validity, because goodness is absent from the world he knows; the entire past world signifies nothing. In this way, "McCarthy calls into question what language and memory can and cannot do, as he 'simultaneously destroys and creates the world through language' " (Mavri 4). The novel itself thus attains its meaning when it meets readers, and

without readers to make sense of the narrative, the novel itself becomes a symbol of the “empty signifier” that the boy sees the man’s stories as being. For this reason, it is curious to consider what the boy’s mental state might be like, had he not his father to enlighten him about the preceding world. The man’s anecdotes provide him with both positive and negative aspects. For example, the man has told the boy what the ocean used to look like, and when they finally reach it; “[h]e could see the disappointment in his face. I’m sorry it’s not blue, he said. That’s okay, said the boy” (McCarthy 181). Arguably, the boy’s disappointment would not be as profound had he not the knowledge that the ocean used to be blue, but had the man deprived him of that particular knowledge, the boy would not have learned about the beauty of the green and vigorous past world. Thus, without the man’s memories, the boy would know only the grey desolate landscape that they inhabit.

As mentioned, the boy’s immediacy illustrated by “okay” indicates a seeming compliance of things. Just as he seems to accept their condition, just as tempted might the reader be to accept the seemingly straightforward telling of the story. However, positioned in between the everyday world and the post-apocalyptic world, the reader, like the man, is in limbo and “must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world, then paradoxically ‘remembering’ the world as it was, as it is” (Mavri 3). In *The Road*, past and present *cannot* be separated, as readers automatically and unconsciously use their own recollections to make sense of everything in the post-apocalyptic world. Had readers not their own associations and memories of things to rely on, the very portrayal of loss that the novel deals with would be meaningless. We experience the feeling of loss because we know what used to be; what *has* been lost. How are we able to understand the appalling misery of a grey, barren ash-covered landscape, had we not the knowledge that the same world used to be green, dynamic and vigorous? It becomes clear that

the novel succumbs to the same paradox that characterizes post-apocalyptic fiction; it conceives of post-apocalyptic landscape as void of referents, empty of meaning, discouraging of hope. Yet the brush the artist uses to paint the nightmare is also what betrays his vision – language. Language carries with it vestiges of the past, memories of things thought long gone, traces of beauty. The remnant, battered, charred, or blackened though it may be, still glows beneath the ashes (...) “*The Road* is therefore a highly ironic work, proclaiming the end of language, of beauty, and of ethics, all the while acting as a witness against itself. (Mavri 11)

As Mavri argues, the novel itself is an integral component in understanding the paradox of language during the post-apocalypse. The genre is ironic, because it uses language from a familiar world to portray circumstances in a world unknown. The novel is proof that past is so intricately connected to present that they are virtually inseparable. All of our knowledge stems from somewhere in the past, and that we use it to make sense of everything, including the present and future. The novel's ending more than anything illuminates this very point. By exploiting associations with smell, touch and sight, it highlights the paradox of language, memory and meaning. That past and present are so very intertwined, that language is a constant reminder the past, that we use language to make sense of whatever world we inhabit, no matter which world that is:

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. Polished and muscular and torsional. 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. (241)

This paper has examined Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* through the scope of literary minimalism. The paper has illuminated the novel's portrayal of memory, experience and language in the post-apocalyptic world, with particular emphasis on the enigmatic relationship between the man and the boy. As a result of their different pasts, the man and the boy are alienated by each other. The man finds that his memories of the past world resonate insufficiently with the boy, and he therefore becomes at conflict with himself; he clings to his past although it torments him greatly while simultaneously wishing to forget his former life. He realizes that, no matter how much he might want to, he cannot separate past from present and he is forced to confront his past and thereby face everything that he has lost. The boy, by using "okay", appears composed about the stories that the man shares with him. However, trying to grasp the meaning of the past creates great unease and uncertainty within him, because the world before the apocalypse is diffuse and foreign to him.

The writing style of the novel is curious in many ways and balances between a minimalist and more elaborate writing style. The novel uses omissions for readers to fill out, it balances between uncomplicated and intricate wording, it lacks certain contractions and quotation marks, and its narration is ambiguous and puzzling at times. The overall feeling readers are left with is an intense sense of detachment – the same feeling that both the boy and the man experience throughout the

story. In *The Road*, memory and experience are imperative and tightly connected, as the novel depends on readers to employ and embed own memories and connotations to make sense of the post-apocalyptic world. The novel thus becomes a work of irony and proves how intricately connected memory, language and meaning-making truly are – no matter which kind of world we attempt to construe.

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