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A brief overview of literary Darwinism and a Darwinian perspective on *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

Ogląd literaturoznawczego darwinizmu i darwinowskiego spojrzenia na powieść *Droga* – Cormaca McCarthy’ego

Abstract

The first section of this paper presents in general terms the main ideas of literary Darwinism represented by Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall and other scholars concerning theory (literature as an adaptation) and interpretative practice. It also reviews the key arguments of this literary school’s critics focusing on the papers of Jonathan Kramnick and William Deresiewicz. The second section is an attempt at applying Darwinian methodology to the interpretation of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy taking into account its reception, style, the behavioural systems (survival, parenting, and cognitive activity), the literary context and the author’s point of view.

Key words: *literary Darwinism, Cormac McCarthy, The Road, Joseph Carroll.*

Abstrakt

Pierwsza część artykułu przedstawia w ogólnym zarysie założenia teoretyczne (funkcja adaptacyjna literatury) i praktykę interpretacyjną literaturoznawczego darwinizmu reprezentowanego przez Josepha Carrola, Jonathana Gottschalla i innych naukowców. Omówione są również najważniejsze argumenty przeciwników tej szkoły – Jonathana Kramnicka i Williama Deresiewicza. Druga część jest próbą

interpretacji powieści *Droga* Cormaca McCarthy'ego z zastosowaniem metodologii literackiego Darwinizmu, uwzględniającą recepcję powieści, jej styl, systemy behawioralne (przetrwanie, rodzicielstwo, aktywność poznawcza), kontekst literacki i perspektywę autora.

Słowa kluczowe: *darwinizm literaturoznawczy, Cormac McCarthy, Droga, Joseph Carroll.*

An overview of literary Darwinism

Can evolutionary psychology and Darwin's discoveries shed light on our understanding of how literature functions in our lives and how we react to literary texts? Literary Darwinists claim, they can and very much so. It is a relatively new and not yet widely accepted approach to literary study, perhaps because the term evokes unpleasant associations with social Darwinism and eugenics. The beginnings of this critical school can be traced back to the 1990s and its emergence is the result of a recoil from the approaches to literature like literary Marxism, Freudian criticism or deconstruction that view literature through the lenses of culture, history, psychoanalysis or language. In spite of certain controversies, the movement has been gaining recognition and in 2005 was even noticed by the popular press – *The New York Times Magazine* devoted an article to it.

In the first section of this paper, I would like to give an overview of the basic tenets of Literary Darwinism and describe how it is perceived by literary scholars critical of this approach. The key figures in this field of inquiry are: Joseph Carroll, Brian Boyd and Jonathan Gottschall. Utilising the principles of biology and evolutionary psychology as represented by Edward Wilson, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, who study mental adaptations of humans to the changing environment, Darwinians try to connect the literary study to science by means of analyzing texts in terms of human nature, biological evolution, adaptation or kin selection. Such nomenclature was earlier unheard of in discussions about literature. Central to the Darwinian approach is the stance that literature is the product of the human mind and, as such, is biologically grounded. Consequently, the study of literature should also be in touch with the biological reality.

Carroll's preoccupation with the evolution of the human mind and its connection to literature was triggered by his study of Darwin's texts and the debate in the social sciences instigated by the publication of Edward Wil-

son's *Sociobiology*, a seminal book in which he demonstrated how evolution affected social behaviour, altruism, aggression and parental care. The heated debate about the dichotomy "nature versus nature" that followed the publication was largely overlooked in the literary circles. Nonetheless, Carroll came up with the idea that the central function of literary study should be to find the meaning of a work of literature with the help of evolutionary psychology and biology. For Darwinians humans are biocultural – a combination of these two spheres: culture and biology provides a theoretical framework for understanding literature. Carroll, writes, "We can integrate evolutionary concepts of human nature with the common understanding embodied in the best of traditional humanistic criticism". (Carroll, 2011, p. 124) Apart from the traditional close reading of text, literary Darwinism postulates empirical study of literature, for example Carroll used systemic analysis to identify agonistic structures in Victorian novels (151 Reading Human Nature).

In the handbooks for supporters of literary Darwinism: *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (2004) and *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (2011) and *Graphing Jane Austen: The Evolutionary Basis of Literary Meaning* (2012) Carroll, apart from laying out theoretical framework for literary study, provides a host of examples how to interpret classic literary texts, including canonical *Hamlet*, using the Darwinian methodology. To illustrate Carroll's approach to a literary text, I will briefly outline his method of interpreting *Hamlet*. First, in his analysis Carroll presents other critical approaches and rejects them as a means of "elaborating their own preconception" (Carroll, 2011, p. 123) rather than interpretations illuminating the meaning of the play. Some of them he deems simply erroneous, for instance, he argues that the Freudian Oedipal theory is mistaken since humans have evolved mechanisms for avoiding incest and there is no direct evidence in the text Hamlet has sexual desire for his mother. (Carroll, 2011, p. 128) Carroll analyses Hamlet's character in terms of personality factors, which are "human universals," and comes up with a statement that Hamlet personifies "the tension between the mind, able to soar free and its inquiries, and the pull of the flesh". (Carroll, 2011, p. 137) He traces the source of Hamlet's melancholy back to the failed mother-child bonding and concludes that *Hamlet* is a long, magnificently articulated cry of emotional pain and moral indignation". (Carroll, 2011, p. 146) In other words, the character of Hamlet embodies the tragic potential in human nature. As it has been shown above Carroll's analysis sets out with the main aim of finding what is universal in the character of Hamlet and traces the biological basis of his behaviour.

This is not to say that in their interpretative practice Darwinians focus solely on what people as a species have in common. It's worth noting that in the collection of essays *The Literary Animal* Carroll specifically warns his followers against reducing "the events of the story to an exemplification of "human universals" or "species – typical behaviours" in the interpretative practice. (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 98) He stresses that tone, style, theme, formal organization, cultural context, responses of readers, sociological, political and psychological function of a text and its connection with other artistic works should also be taken into account. (Carroll, 2011, p. 70) Last but not least, Carroll emphasises the significance of point of view in the interpretation of a literary text: "One of the chief analytic procedures a critic needs to perform in assessing any literary representation is to assess the relations between the author's point of view, the point of view of the characters, and the point of view in the audience that is implied or projected by the author". (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 91) According to Carroll, the meaning of a literary work is vested in the author's mind.

Alongside literary criticism a major area of interest for literary Darwinists and a much debated question is the assumption that arts, including literature, are adaptive. What is more, the need to tell stories is coded in our genes and has been transmitted through generations. According to another key figure in literary Darwinism, an American philosopher of art, the author of *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* Denis Dutton the origin of this adaptation can be traced back to the Pleistocene (2,5 million to 12,000 BC) when "our modern intellectual constitution was probably achieved". (Dutton, 2009, p. 47) Back then telling stories gave people a fitness advantage because groups whose members told stories were able to reason how to plan their hunting trips more effectively or predict what would happen if, for instance, they were attacked by another group. Storytelling also helped to promote moral and prosocial behaviours and, as a result, improved such groups' survival rate. Consequently, members of these communities passed on their storytelling genes to the next generations of people and, as a result, human beings are able to produce and appreciate literature.

These ideas have caused and adverse reaction in part of the literary community, just to mention some: Bruce Clarke and his article in *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, William Deresiewicz in *The Nation* or Jonathan Kramnick's paper "Against Literary Darwinism" in *Critical Inquiry*. In his article and the roundtable discussion on the nature of narrative at Stanford university in 2009 Kramnick attacks the premise that the ability to create narratives is an adaptive feature of human beings. First of all, he points out that biolo-

gy does not give an explanation of how storytelling is implemented in the brain or coded in our DNA and according to him speculations about people's lifestyle in the Pleistocene do not constitute convincing evidence due to the paucity of knowledge about life in such distant past; rendering the biology of storytelling guesswork. He also accuses literary Darwinists that, inspired by Chomsky's discoveries about the innateness of language, they have been trying too hard and without much convincing evidence to find the proof for the innateness of other mind faculties, storytelling included. For Kramnick the only mental faculty that is hardwired and related to storytelling (which does not equate it with storytelling) is the development of pretence and imagination which can be first observed in children at the age of about 18 months. As Kramnick argues another difference between language and storytelling is the fact that the second is a conscious activity as opposed to processing language, which happens automatically. Finally, he states that we could live in a physically identical world, even if we never told stories, so the storytelling skill is not essential for survival. Then, using a term coined by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin (Gould et al., 1979) literature would be a "spandrel," that is a by-product of the evolutionary process.

William Deresiewicz, in turn, highlights the difficulty in defining universal human nature, which is what evolutionary psychology strives to achieve. He raises the problem of fictionality in literature. Fictionality, he claims, is a relatively new phenomenon and literary Darwinism does not present convincing evidence to explain its function. The key accusation that Deresiewicz makes is that evolutionary psychology and its progeny, literary Darwinism, focus on what people have in common, whereas literature very often is about differences and particular human cultures, so these reductive tendencies of Darwinians result in an "impoverished view of literature and life". (Deresiewicz, 2009) Last but not least, Deresiewicz sees the weaknesses of literary Darwinism in its neglect of poetry, flawed classification of literary genres and finds the quantitative study of literature as well as the idea to use MRI technology to test readers' responses to literature or salivary swabs to test the changes in readers' hormones ridiculous.

Summing up, the debate on whether narratives can have an adaptive function in our development and whether using the theory of evolution to understand literature makes sense is still ongoing and no consensus has emerged. Apparently, scientific knowledge at present does not give enough hard evidence to prove or disprove the adaptive function of literature beyond any shadow of doubt.

A Darwinian perspective on *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* published in 2006 is a dystopian post-apocalyptic novel which describes the vicissitudes of nameless father and son who in search of warmth traverse the United States after some unspecified catastrophe. The novel follows the convention of the post-apocalyptic genre which chronicles the end of the world as we know it. Some critics, for instance, Heather Hicks, identify Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as a the first post-apocalyptic novel (Crusoe's predicament is the same as that of post-apocalyptic fiction characters), followed by Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells. In the twentieth century post-apocalyptic writing is represented by *Nordenholt's Million* by Alfred Walter Stewart, *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut or *Always Coming Home* by Ursula K. Le Guin, just to mention a few. The last two decades, after 9/11 have seen an increase in post-apocalyptic writing with *the Dies the Fire* by S. M. Stirling, *World Made by Hand* by James Kunstler or *Player One* by Douglas Coupland. Most of them, *The Road* included, contain familiar elements of the genre: "ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence, including cannibalism, enacted by roving gangs of outlaws". (Hicks, 2016, p. 6)

The reception of *The Road* was more than favourable. It received James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2006 and the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. Additionally, it was one of four finalists for National Book Critics Circle Award and in 2009 was adapted for the screen. A number of scholars analysed *The Road* from various perspectives. Heather Hicks has studied the legacy of Robinson Crusoe and the echoes of colonialism, Inger-Anne Søfting has focused on its post-apocalyptic discourse, Naomi Morgenstern has taken a feminist stance on the issue of patriarchy, Sean Donnelly has interpreted the book as a comment on the potential peak oil crisis and Russel M. Hillier has addressed the question of intertextuality in the novel. The reason why *The Road* has been appealing to so many readers and researchers could be that it resonates with universal fears about the future of our planet related to: military tensions around the world, constant transgression of the Earth's biophysical boundaries, capacity of the ecosystem being at its limit, threat of terrorism and global nuclear war, etc. It also echoes past traumas, for instance, the heaps of clothes belonging to the victims of cannibals are reminiscent of concentration camp scenes. Also terrified naked people in the human meat cel-

lar resemble prisoners in gas chambers during the Holocaust. But the feeling that we live in times of crisis has always accompanied humankind. As Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* writes, “It seems doubtful that our crisis, our relation to the future and to the past, is one of the important differences between us and our predecessors. Many of them felt as we do. [...] There is nothing at all distinguishing about eschatological anxiety; it was, one gathers, a feature of Mesopotamian culture”. (Kermode, 2000, p. 95) And so, the novel answers the familiar question: What would it be like if the fears about the future came true and horrors from the past happened again?

The Road portrays the aftermath of a cataclysm. However, the cause of the apocalypse remains obscured and the only information we get about it in the text is: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 54) The novel depicts the world a few years after the event when the collapse of the biosphere is starting to become apparent. There are hardly any people left; cities are either burned to the ground or abandoned and crumbling. The world is in the state of entropy – winters are deepening, the sun is clouded out, there are almost no surviving animals or plants; the earth is deprived of an ecosystem: “The land was gullied and eroded and barren. The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes. Middens of anonymous trash. Farmhouses in the fields scoured of their paint and the clapboards spooned and sprung from the wall studs”. (McCarthy, p. 189) So, the reader familiar with post-apocalyptic writing should not be surprised by such vignettes.

In this monochromatic wasteland basic social structures and norms usually taken for granted are gone. The father and son travel southwards hiding from other people, as violence is rampant and cannibalism widespread. The society is reduced to bands of marauding survivors, road agents or single travellers who hide from one another in fear of being captured, killed and subsequently eaten. In spite of the sense of near collapse, the father and son trudge on, starving and bedraggled, hoping for warmth in the south. Like mythical Prometheus they carry fire. Their possessions (a toy truck, incomplete pack of cards, butane lighter, pistol, tarp, binoculars and some canned food) are pushed down deserted highways in a supermarket trolley with a motorcycle mirror attached to the handle. They encounter numerous horrors: mummified corpses of people everywhere, dead bodies stuck in the molten asphalt of the road, a dried human head under a cake bell, a half eaten new-born infant or a cellar full of ghost-like naked people who serve as food for those who captured them. These end-time scenes reminiscent of Dürer’s visions of the apocalypse are manifestations of the human potential for evil.

Another aspect in which McCarthy's novel really shines, and perhaps the reason that makes both critics and general audience appreciate it, is the language. Quite a few scholars and critics noted McCarthy's peculiar style in *The Road*, which makes it different from his other works. What is striking is the elemental, repetitive, pared down character of the dialogue and non-standard punctuation. Interestingly, Ashley Kunsu sees McCarthy's approach to language, which is so distant from post-modern play with it, and his strategy for naming (more specifically, virtual lack of names for people and places) as redemptive. In the ground zero she sees potential for new Eden with new names. (Kunsu, 2009, p. 59) Further developing her argument, Kunsu identifies the boy as an Adam figure in the text. Undoubtedly, the ending offers a glimmer of hope for some kind of rebirth. Nevertheless, discerning proto-Eden among universal destruction is, I believe, too far-fetched with the majority of facts about this post-apocalyptic world making it difficult to imagine any kind of life there (with the biosphere in the state of collapse), definitely, light years away from paradise.

Lindsey Banco also makes some keen observations about McCarthy's non-standard punctuation in *The Road*, more specifically, about the use of apostrophised and unapostrophised contractions. She notices that the first kind is used to "affirm or assert instead of deny or annihilate," whereas the second kind tends to express negation. (Banco, 2010, p. 277) Furthermore, she argues that the lack of quotation marks and the overall restraint is a way of thematising absence and lack, which are one of the key concerns of this novel. (Banco, 2010, p. 276) Take the following dialogue between the boy and the man:

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?
 No. Of course not.
 Even if we were starving?
 We're starving now.
 You said we weren't.
 I said we weren't dying. I didn't say we weren't starving.
 But we wouldn't.
 No. We wouldn't.
 No matter what.
 No. No matter what.
 Because we're the good guys.
 Yes.
 And we're carrying the fire.
 And we're carrying the fire. Yes.
 Okay. (McCarthy, p. 136)

Other scholars, for instance, Kenneth Lincoln focus on the poetic features of McCarthy's prose. Lincoln points out the rhythmic, almost musical nature of the man's dreams, descriptions and narrator's comments: "[the boy and the man] walk on in spondaic hexameters and trochaic pentameters through an interstate charnel of sunless hell". (Lincoln, 2009, p. 173) He asserts that the beauty of the figurative language in certain passages in the novel is an attempt at redeeming "a fallen world, a humanity gone rabidly insane [...]" (Lincoln p. 164) and a way to help the reader get through this harrowing story. A good illustration of that would be the following poetic sentence: "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 32) Another passage exemplifying this quality of McCarthy's style is the depiction of a marauder who is about to attack the boy as seen through the father's eyes: "This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 79) Thus, I believe the strength of the novel and the manifestation of McCarthy's skill as a writer is that there are two kinds of style in *The Road*. On the one hand, the pared down, fragmented, repetitive dialogues, which mirror the stark reality the characters found themselves in. On the other hand, the metaphorical descriptions of landscapes, dreams and narrator's comments that are aesthetically pleasing for readers and thematise the resilience of human psyche as well as the potential for beauty and goodness which has not entirely disappeared from this godforsaken world.

Since in *The Road* human life has been reduced to the basics with all cultural and social constraints removed, the Darwinian perspective seems to be particularly suited for its analysis. With the norms imposed by the society and culture gone, characters are like buildings stripped of their facades showing beams and girders. In a few places McCarthy establishes a link between the characters and the animal world. Take, for instance, the comparison of the man's eyes to those of a reptile quoted above or the following description of the same man: "like an animal inside a skull looking out of the eyeholes." However, dehumanization is also evident in the sentences referring to the two main characters and their plight: "They stood in the rain like farm animals" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 20) or "[...] two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 138) Since the society as we know it is virtually non-existent in the novel and only part of people organize themselves in small bands of marauders or slave owners, what transpires is human nature, which is a key concept for literary Darwinists. Joseph Car-

roll devoted a lot of his work to define the term and explain how it helps in the analysis of literature. In “Literary Animal” he constructs a diagram of human nature with inclusive fitness, which is the number of offspring one manages to beget and support in their lifetime, as the key principle regulating human life. (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 89) Carroll defines human nature as “a set of elemental motives and dispositions”. (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 91) He also singles out seven behavioural systems and motivational goals for each system. In McCarthy’s novel the systems I would like to focus on are: survival, parenting, kin relations, and cognitive activity.

In Carroll’s classification survival arouses: avoiding predators, obtaining food, seeking shelter and defeating enemies. (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 89) The father and son in *The Road* are trying to achieve all of these goals. As it was shown above, McCarthy draws an analogy between his main characters and animals being hunted. The predators are in this case bands of cannibals, to whom they can fall prey to and be eaten like small rodents by a raptor. The two of them constantly hide from others, scanning the area with binoculars in search of smoke or movement and the slightest suspicion that people are in the vicinity makes them run and hide. Even individual travellers are potentially dangerous because a harmless looking pilgrim can be a bait working for road agents. The man carries a pistol with only two bullets, which he uses to defend his son against the member of marauders’ band. In fact, everybody they meet on their way is an enemy, bar Ely (the only named character) and the family who rescue the boy after his father’s death. With hardly any plants growing, the only option left, as far as nutrition is concerned, is scavenging abandoned houses or supermarkets for the remains of canned food. Periods of starvation are common and food as well as shoes become the most looked for resources: “Mostly he worried about shoes. That and food. Always food”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 16) Some of the travellers they meet on the road, like Ely do not wear shoes at all but have their feet wrapped in rags and cardboard tied with twine. As for seeking shelter, they mainly spend their days outside either walking, or resting by the fire, covered with a tarp, in spite of increasing cold and frequent rains. The only moment of relief is when they come across a bunker stocked by preppers who expected a catastrophe to come. The shelter emerges as an oasis in the desert. It is there they get a chance to have a proper bath, eat plenty of canned food and sleep in beds.

Because the characters’ lives are reduced to fighting for survival, there is very little space left for other aspects of life, like the behavioural system called in Carroll’s diagram cognitive activity, which contains directives such

as: telling stories, painting pictures, forming beliefs and acquiring knowledge. These are the activities which are not completely absent in *The Road*, but, as predicted, they are reduced to a minimum. In fact, the man mourns them in the following passage: “There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 137) There is a scene in the novel when the man finds an old brass sextant on an abandoned ship and is struck by its beauty. It really stirs him but the only thing he can do is put it back in the locker. The beautiful object produced a long time before by unknown hands has no use in this reality. Aesthetics in this charred world exists, neither in the form of objects because most of them are slowly turning into dust (and nobody makes new ones) nor nature, because it has also been destroyed. It is embodied in the only innocent creature left – the son: “The boy was so thin. He watched him while he slept. Taut face and hollow eyes. A strange beauty”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 108) It also transpires in another passage: “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, 2009, p. 56) In such descriptions the boy transpires as the final link with the past and his physical qualities as well as features of character are out of this world.

Another motivational goal that human cognitive activity arouses is telling stories. The father tells his son the tales of the former world “old stories of courage and justice”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 42) As the novel progresses the stories are becoming more and more ineffective as a source of comfort. “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”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 163) The stories about the old world are not applicable to their reality and there are none to tell about the new world. In one of the final scenes of the novel the boy does not want to hear or tell any more stories. He dismisses his father’s stories as untrue because they all have happy endings. The boy has no stories to tell since the only ones he knows are about real life, and the reality is not something to talk about. After a while the father tries to comfort the boy at the same summing up their life: “It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 288) The man is trying to convince the boy their life is meaningful and at the same time an analogy is established between life and stories. Hence, metaphorically end of storytelling means death, with one

of the indispensable components of human existence gone. This idea is in keeping with the Darwinians' hypothesis of storytelling as an adaptation. A skill that, among others, has enabled people as a species to survive.

Parenting is another basic motivational system as well as part of human nature and it is the key concept the novel operates around. There is an important clue as for the author's focus in this work – the novel is dedicated to the author's son. If according to Carroll "the primary locus of meaning for all literary work is the mind of the author" (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 90), it is worth finding out what the author has to say about his text. Cormac McCarthy is a somewhat mysterious figure, notorious for avoiding interviews and one of the very few he did was for Oprah Winfrey's "Book Club". In the conversation with the journalist he explains that when he was spending the night with his then four-year-old son in a hotel room in El Paso, he woke up at night, looked out of the window and had the vision of wasteland and the idea for a book came to him. McCarthy says the novel was created thanks to his son who practically co-wrote it. He specifically states that if he did not have a son, the book would have never been written. When implored by Oprah, McCarthy explains the novel was "just about the man and the boy on the road". (McCarthy, 2007) Considering the above facts, it's justified to assume that paternity is the central theme in *The Road* and the understanding of the father and son relationship is key in the interpretation of the novel.

As it was stated above, the boy is the only reason the man, unlike his wife does not yield to the temptation of suicide. In his father's eyes the son is the proof of the existence of God. In the opening scene of the novel the man reflects: "If he [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 3) What is more, in certain scenes the child emerges as a god-like creature. The following thoughts come to the man's mind when he is watching the boy asleep: "Golden chalice, good to house a god. Please don't tell me how the story ends". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 79) The analogy between a story and life is evident here as well. Later on when they meet the old traveller, Ely, the man speaking of his son says: "What if I said that he's a god?". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 183) Clearly, the boy is the last link with the old world and its ethics or even with spirituality. Although he was born at the moment of the cataclysm and does not even know the old world, his goodness and generous nature manifesting themselves in the behaviours unheard of in the post-apocalyptic world make him look like a holdover from the past. In the boy the markers of civilization are preserved. His father has taught him how to read, he knows the words of prayers, he shows adherence to moral values of the lost world, kindness and mercy to total strangers,

even though it could endanger their own existence. He seems to understand and know a lot more than the man thinks he does. What is more, if it was not for the boy, the man is certain he would kill himself. Even in the dues ex machine moment when they find the bunker full of provisions, the father reflects on life and comes to the conclusion: “Even now some part of him wished he’d never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over”. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 163) So, the parental instinct is what keeps the man going. The life of his son is more valuable than his own.

The behaviour that particularly stands out in this post-apocalyptic reality is the boy’s altruism. He is willing to share food with strangers and help them. He begs his father has mercy over a thief who steals their belongings and is subsequently caught and forced at gunpoint to remove his clothes in the middle of the road on a cold day by the boy’s father – practically a death sentence. From the evolutionary perspective altruism is a behaviour that is coded in our genes. There are certain explanations for this phenomenon, for example Christopher Boehm, an American cultural anthropologist in his book “Hierarchy in the Forest” is an advocate of the view that between-group selection is an explanation for altruistic behaviours. He states the chances for the survival of a group of hunter-gatherers in which altruists prevailed were greater than those of a group consisting of cheaters and freeloaders. (Boehm, 2001, p. 197) Evolutionary psychologists are also interested in the reasons why humans help unrelated strangers. They see the origin of generosity in “a cue-driven, ecologically rational psychology that is designed for long-term cooperation and that evolved because of its positive feedback on the fitness of its bearer”. (Szynger et al., 2019) So in the long run, altruism and generosity have been beneficial for us as a species and helped us survive. In the post apocalyptic world of *The Road* however, they are shown as abnormal. Nobody cooperates with or helps anybody, except for the boy and the family that adopts him in the end. All the rest of characters want to save their own lives at others’ expense, even if for some it involves cannibalism. Even the father does things that are morally questionable and evoke ambiguous feelings in the reader, for instance, leaving the thief to die naked on the road or telling Ely he never would have given him any food if it had not been for the boy’s insistence.

From any reader’s perspective the world as it is depicted by McCarthy is populated by deviants. Human nature in this novel is in most cases deformed. Abnormality is the norm. The man imagines the future in the following way: “The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunnelled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble

white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 192) The future world as imagined by the man is the straightforward description of the realm of the devil. Hence, by analogy, the time the novel is set in would be a kind of purgatory for people, a staging post of sorts, the moment when the future of the world gets determined. Ely notices that they are in some kind of in-between place and says that the world is a place nobody wants to be in and nobody wants to leave. (McCarthy, 2009, p. 180) There are two options for the humankind: either the decline into total nothingness – uninhabited earth because people will have eaten each other. Or possibly, some kind of rebirth, however unlikely. Which one is favoured in the novel depends on our interpretation of the ending. On the one hand, the boy is found by a family who have children (a boy and a girl), so in this meeting some hope for the continuation of the human species is offered. Besides, all the way through the novel the father repeats that both of them, are on a mission – they are carrying fire. So there is more to their life than just survival and after his father's death, the boy is to continue the mission in the future. On the other hand, the final passage in the novel is the description of a river full of trout swimming in it with "vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming [...] Of a thing that could not be put back. Not be made right again". (McCarthy, 2009, p. 307) This vision offers a perspective that is drained of hope, indicating that a point of no return has been reached.

The deformed human nature, without altruism or art, as it is emblemized in most of the characters in the novel does not ensure survival. Although Heather Hicks claims that because of his goodness the boy "appears entirely unadapted for the new world in which he was born," (Hicks, 2016, p. 90) his altruism is, in fact, a behaviour that has been proven to help us survive as a species. In the end, he is the one who pulls through. According to Joseph Carroll, "No culture can deviate from human universals (by definition), but many individual people can and do deviate from species-typical norms of behaviour. [...] The behaviour that is depicted in literary texts does not necessarily exemplify universal or species-typical behavioural patterns, but species-typical patterns form an indispensable frame of reference for the communication of meaning [...]". (Gottschall et al., 2005, p. 92) Thus, the graphic portrayal of the world inhabited by aberrant types, modern savages with the exception of the boy, his father and the family that adopts him, is not the true picture of human nature with the veil of culture lifted but rather a record of the author's and readers fears about the future.

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