

*Please turn off phones, tablets & computers*

## *The Road (2006)*



- Cormac McCarthy (1933- )
- 10 novels, 1 play, Pulitzer Prize (2007)
- Catholic, southern states
- Novels of American west
- Late commercial success
- Secretive, perfectionist
- Called “the Faulkner of our generation”
- Southern gothic
- Past, present, future
- *The Road* inspired by son

# Contemporary apocalypses

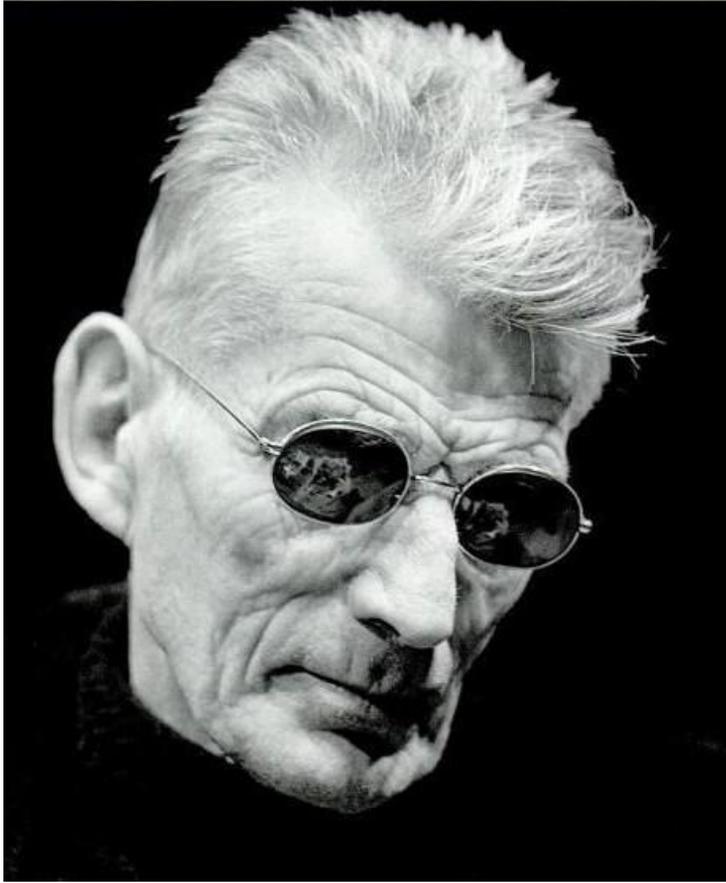
- 2006: variety of apocalypses
- Nuclear, environmental, viral, economic
- *The Road*: never specifies
- Story background:
- 52 memory of explosion
- 59 fires and birth of son
- 58 suicide of mother
- Social chaos (32)
- Passage of years: 28
- Sun blocked, animals & plants dead
- Falling ash
- Man and boy – never named
- Title: *The Road*
- journey
- epic tradition: *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*
- metaphor for self-discovery
- a return home

# American tradition



- Westward migration - California
- Federal highway act 1956
- Rise of car culture, mobility, suburbs
- Romance of travel
- Home: 25
- Journey: south and to the ocean
- source of life
- Ironies: no women, man dying
- Suicide (113)

# Nihilism



- Samuel Beckett (1906-89)
- *Waiting for Godot* (1949)
  - Estragon and Vladimir
  - a country road, a bare tree
  - “Let’s go” (they do not move)
- *The Road* 26
  - Blind man – Ely, 168ff
- Eli = Old Testament Israelite judge

## American contingency



- Man with shopping cart
- homeless
- 2006: George W. Bush, subprime mortgage crisis
- Mortgage delinquencies
- Recession & unemployment
- Wealth iniquities
- The new homeless: families
- Incipient disaster

# 9/11

- <http://www.oprah.com/oprahbookclub/Cormac-McCarthy-on-Writing>
- Visuals: falling ash, gray world
- Incomprehensible scale
- G. W. Bush: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”
- Division of world into good and bad guys:
- Gulf Wars:
- immolation
- ash and desert





# Dream

- Opening scene: cave
- Plato's analogy of the cave:
  - sun = truth, wisdom
  - move towards illumination
- Dream: sentient monster
- Seeks darkness
- World grows darker
- Wisdom lost
- "carry the fire"
- Ultimate symbol of loss: cannibalism
  - final taboo
  - leveled against "others"
- post-apocalyptic = methodical 110-1
- 195 & 198
- test question for boy: 284
- symbol of capitalism

# Grail quest

- Original title: “The Grail”
- The Holy Grail: cup used by Jesus
- Grail myth: Perceval, feral child
- A wounded, starving world
- The grail a distant, hidden hope
- *The Road*: feral child – born after
- Wounded world:
  - failure of mother’s love (57)
  - denial of God (17)
- Grail?
- The boy:
  - 75
  - 172
  - 277
- Worry for other people: 85, 163-4, 280-1
- Reactions to violence
- “Carrying the fire”
- Ending: finds family

# Refuge

- Boy's inclinations to help
- hospitality
- Shelter:
- Bomb shelter 138
- near death – luck
- build for a different apocalypse
- prayer 146
- Grand house 204ff
- 208-9 :contrast
- complete collapse of privilege
- Ship 222ff
- Pajaro de Esperanza
- Bird of Hope
- Tenerife: Canary Islands
- *Robinson Crusoe (1719)*, Daniel DeFoe
- world industry and trade
- flare gun: become weapon

# American west & myth

- Pastoral in American context
- old west, cowboys
- self-realization, rugged individualism
- ingenuity
- anti-technological & intellectual



# Violence

- Purifying, righteous violence
- Hero restores pastoral virtue through violent act
- defends innocent
- Destroys the machines
- Often a hero from away
- Fetish of the gun
- *The Road*:
  - anti-pastoral landscape but . . .
  - no machines, comforts
  - individualism, ingenuity
  - nights around campfire, tinned food
  - a nightmare western world
- 61 diesel truck – machine
- 65 stand off and shooting
- 263 attack with bow
- gun, few bullets

# American redemption

- Narratives of personal redemption
  - Personal salvation and re-creation
  - American know-how
  - Work ethic
- Narratives of national redemption
  - Charismatic leaders
  - Simple fixes
- American exceptionalism
  - God backs America
  - Destined to lead the world
- *The Road*:
  - National redemption lost
  - Map falling apart
  - 43 states are gone
  - last lines: “not put back”
- Personal redemption?
  - Ending?
  - Is there a final redemption?

## Last paragraph

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 made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

Appeal to senses

Specific images

Unusual diction

## Last paragraph

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 made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

Life in the past (see 20)

Contrast the dream monster

Microcosm and macrocosm

Irreparable loss

Last sentence?

# Style

- Fragmented narrative
  - events, dreams
  - fading memories 51, 63, 31
  - blend together 32
  - disjointed, featureless reality
  - lack of sustaining narrative
  - movement, but no linear progress
- Lack of quotation marks:
  - demarcation not needed
  - so few people
  - desolation of the page
- Contractions: 127-8
  - “dont” “didnt” vs “I’m” “That’s”
  - negative contractions = no apostrophe
  - affirming statements = apostrophe
- McCarthy: clarity, simplicity

# God

- 83% of Americans belong to a religion
- Majority of pop. Believes in God
- 72% believe in angels
- 71% in eternal soul
- Highest rates of church attendance: southern states (58%)
- Religious reaction to catastrophe



- 32 religious reactions to apocalypse?
- 52 dream of tattered gods
- 181 fallen pilgrims
- Ely 170
- 16 “bloodcults”
- 90 “runic slogans, creeds misspelled”
- 91ff cult?
- Failure of orthodox religious explanation
  - apocalypse indiscriminate
  - “saved” are still in peril
  - lack of explanation (why? how?)
  - = lack of justifying narrative
  - no cause
  - no redemption
  - no God?
- 286 woman’s message
- Boy speaks to father
- Heaven? 12-13
- Past, not future

# Summmmary

- American apocalypse:
  - 9/11 and war
  - economic collapse
- American myths and stories:
  - old west
  - redemption
  - exceptionalism
- American certainties:
  - God
- Nihilism?
- Or optimism:
  - the boy
  - the family
  - memory
- Will humanity survive or become a memory?