“EVER IS NO TIME AT ALL”: THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION AND CORMAC McCARTHY’S *THE ROAD*

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ABSTRACT

As a sub-genre of science fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction typically presents a scenario in which human life continues after some cataclysmic event has decimated the world’s population. Its aims are thus congruent with those of biblical apocalyptic literature, which characteristically promises that the current world will be destroyed and replaced with one that is new and reserved only for the steadfast and the faithful. This thesis explores science fiction’s compatibility with biblical apocalyptic literature and examines how post-apocalyptic fiction has become one of the most relevant modern genres for serious theological consideration.

To this end, this thesis considers the literary influences of science fiction and biblical apocalyptic literature, the ideas and imagery of the biblical book of Revelation, and the theological significance of Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, a representative work of post-apocalyptic fiction. Such an examination reveals the ways in which post-apocalyptic fiction utilizes the themes and symbols of biblical and apocalyptic literature to present similar warnings, similar promises, and similar appeals to steadfast faith. An examination of The Road within the context of McCarthy’s bibliography and American history reveals that the preponderance of apocalyptic literature during ancient periods of
social unrest or religious persecution may be connected to the prevalence of post-
apocalyptic fiction in a post-9/11 United States.

Finally, this thesis concludes that the significance of both apocalyptic literature
and post-apocalyptic fiction is revealed through the ability of the written word to provide
readers with a clearer understanding of human existence. While the standard tale of post-
apocalypse has evolved to exclude overt promises of hope or rewarded faith, it seems
clear that the modern apocalyptic mindset may not be exceptionally different from that of
ancient authors of apocalyptic literature. Ultimately, the act of storytelling itself still
allows for the affirmation and perpetuation of human morality.
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CHAPTER 1: BIBLICAL APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE, SCIENCE FICTION, AND THEIR COMPATIBLE LITERARY INFLUENCES

As a defined literary genre, science fiction has existed for less than a century. Authors such as H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Allan Poe began in the late nineteenth century to publish stories that would later be considered representative of the genre, but the “first English-language magazine entirely devoted to sf was Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, founded in 1926” (Attebery 2003, 32). Perhaps shortsightedly, Gernsback viewed the genre—which he initially dubbed scientifiction—principally as “a didactic enterprise intended to spread enthusiasm for the various technological devices” that he advertised in his magazines (Attebery 2003, 30). Even the genre’s name, now so commonly referenced and immediately evocative of its stereotypical contents, has been in popular use only since the late 1920s. Yet many of the conventions of science fiction—as well as the social circumstances that resulted in or stimulated its popularity at the turn of the twentieth century—are shared by a literary genre several millennia older. Apocalyptic literature as exemplified by the book of Revelation, the final entry in the canonical New Testament, has been written primarily “to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption” (Rosen 2008, xii). A similar description could just as easily be applied to science fiction, which so often imagines “ways in which human society might be reorganized on earth [through] . . . legislation, education, or institutional changes” (James 2003, 227). A consideration of the forces and formative influences responsible for the
creation of apocalyptic literature and science fiction will further reveal the complementariness of the two genres.

If it is true that what “science fiction aims at is destroying old assumptions and suggesting a new, and often visionary, reality” (Ketterer 1974, 18), then apocalyptic literature can very reasonably be said to share this aim. After all, apocalyptic literature conventionally “deals with the future [and] . . . predicts a coming crisis that is to result in the destruction of the current order, the judgment of the living and the dead, and the subsequent establishment of a new, divinely governed order” (McKee 2007, 236). And just as twentieth-century authors of science fiction have attempted to accomplish in their own works, “apocalyptic writers condemn the evils of their own times, often drawing direct connections between the unrighteousness of today and the devastations of tomorrow” (McKee 2007, 236). Writers of both science fiction and apocalyptic literature, in other words, endeavor to imagine the manner in which a possible future will result from or be influenced by the society in which they currently dwell. Whereas the societal and literary influences that shaped science fiction can be more easily identified because of their existence in recent world history, however, the writings and historical events from which creators of apocalyptic literature drew inspiration are somewhat vaguer and far more historically distant.

Though its influences can’t be determined with exactitude, apocalyptic literature appears to have emerged from a confluence of Jewish prophetic literature, the sacred scriptures of Zoroastrianism, the Avesta, and perhaps the most ancient literary genre of
all, the combat myth. Jewish prophetic literature is typified by the biblical books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and is identifiable by “its national scope, its basis in tradition and realistic experience, its human authorship, its use of human instruments, its testing by fulfillment, and its origin in preaching and action” (Leigh 2008, 5). The works of the biblical prophets “contain extended sayings and speeches that purport to come from the prophet whose name the book bears” and most likely “originated as oral pronouncements by the prophet to a public audience” (Newsom 2007, 969). The canonical books of the Bible regarded as works of prophecy were often revised after their transcription in order to apply to new societal circumstances or to entirely different geographical locations; in general, however, the prophet represented “an intermediary between God and the people, and one of the major functions was that of messenger” (Newsom 2007, 970). Apocalyptic literature differed from these prophetic works in “its cosmic scope, its basis in universal history, its use of visionary symbols, its anonymous authorship, its lack of human instruments and dependence on direct divine action, its greater emphasis on promise than on fulfillment, and its origin in writing” (Leigh 2008, 5). The book of Daniel is generally regarded as the first work of biblical apocalyptic literature; its apocalyptic portions were written pseudonymously “during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes as a symbolic protest giving hope in the time of persecution” (Leigh 2008, 6). Simon Pearson contends that “what distinguishes Daniel’s prophecy from previous ones is the emphasis it places on a total and utter transformation of the created order: corrupt earthly empires are destroyed and replaced, once and for all, by a
totally new order to things” (2006, 42). Consequently, Daniel’s status as an apocalyptic work can be connected in large part to its more universal message; the work’s author seems to have desired to communicate to a more broadly human rather than a strictly national audience and contended that “God would punish the wicked and redeem the faithful” (Levine 2007, 1253). The book of Revelation, also referred to as the Apocalypse of St. John, borrowed from and built upon the genre innovations of the book of Daniel; its alternate title is “derived from the Greek *apokalypsis*, from the verb ‘to lift the lid off something’, whence comes its secondary, more poetic meaning ‘the lifting of a veil, a sudden revelation’” (Pearson 2006, 2). More than any other works, the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation can be considered responsible for apocalyptic literature’s definition as a genre; works categorized as apocalyptic characteristically include:

- an imminent end-time, a cosmic catastrophe, a movement from an old to a new age, a struggle between forces of good and evil (sometimes personified in angels and demons) a desire for an ultimate paradise (often parallel to an original paradise), the transitional help of God or a messiah, and a final judgment and manifestation of the ultimate. (Leigh 2008, 5)

To an extent, apocalyptic literature can be identified because of the ways in which its authors differentiated their works from existing pieces of biblical prophetic literature.

Perhaps equally as influential as Jewish prophecy to the creation of apocalyptic literature, however, was the Avesta, the collected sacred scriptures of the Zoroastrian religion. Even if one considers apocalyptic literature through the lens of its more narrow definition as “a narrative which depicts how God grants his selected prophet or saint a
vision or revelation of things that remain hidden to the rest of us” (Pearson 2006, 2), the Avesta can be considered a thoroughly apocalyptic document. After all, until sometime in the mid second century BC, “Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Indo-Iranians and the rest were all agreed that the world had been established and set in order by the gods, and was still watched over by the gods, and would always remain more or less as it now was” (Cohn 1995, 2). Cohn contends that “the first person to break out of this static view of the world and to tell of a coming consummation, when the present, imperfect, unstable world will be replaced by a new, perfect, and unthreatened world, was the Iranian prophet Zarathustra, commonly known by the Greek version of his name, Zoroaster” (Cohn 1995, 2). Zoroaster reinterpreted the concepts that defined the Avesta and created in the process an entirely new religious paradigm; his achievement itself seems compatible with the role of the apocalyptic protagonist, who “learns about some of the secrets of God’s ultimate purpose, about how the world will end and how the dead will be judged” (Pearson 2006, 2). Zoroaster’s most important modification to the Avesta may have been his reconsideration of asha, “the notion of all-embracing order” (Cohn 1995, 23). The force recognized as asha could be identified not only through “the alternation of day and night and the cycle of the seasons, and the order of human life” but also through “the ritual order, which prescribed just how sacrifices were to be made to the gods” (Cohn 1995, 2). Asha could be applied to individuals–any person regarded as honest, moral, or ethical might be considered individually illustrative of asha–or to the entire creative structure of the world itself; because of asha, “the day broke, rivers flowed, nourishing
plants grew tall, cows gave their milk” (Cohn 1995, 24). In short, asha stood for all that was orderly, decent, and good. Zoroaster redefined the understanding of asha by attributing responsibility of the force to just one god, Ahura Mazda, whom he argued “was the first cause of everything in the universe that is good, whether divine or human, animate or inanimate, abstract or concrete—in short, of asha and everything that is in accord with asha” (Cohn 1995, 23). Additionally, Zoroaster redefined asha’s opposite force, druj, as the domain of a single, malevolent god, “Angra Mainyu, who was the spirit of destruction, of active evil (Cohn 1995, 23). By pitting a force of divine good against a force of divine evil, Zoroaster replaced the conventional perception of an orderly world watched over by many gods with one in which a “relatively peaceful social order [is] threatened by an aggression from outside” (Cohn 1995, 26). Given that apocalyptic literature would come to be defined by the way in which it “predicts a coming crisis that is to result in the destruction of the current order, the judgment of the living and the dead, and the subsequent establishment of a new, divinely governed order” (McKee 2007, 236), it seems likely that Zoroaster’s reinterpretation of the forces of asha and druj may have served as a defining influence for the creation of the later genre.

A consideration of apocalyptic literature’s formative influences might focus primarily on the way the genre differs from biblical prophecy, the genre it resembles most closely. And the influence of Zoroastrianism, particularly its representation of an ongoing battle between a divine force of good and a divine force of evil, helped to create in apocalyptic literature a genre of cosmic relevance in which all human existence hangs
in the balance. Yet both biblical prophecy and those Zoroastrian innovations apocalyptic literature eventually subsumed were themselves evidently influenced by the ancient combat myth. Scholar Richard Clifford asserts, in fact, that the combat myth “lasted as a live genre into the period of full-blown apocalyptic works and had an enormous influence on them” (Clifford 2003, 6). Because the combat myth had “provided ancient poets with a conceptual framework for reflecting on divine power and human kingship, and on the rise and fall of nations” (Clifford 2003, 6), the genre seems likely to have been an obvious and appropriate point of reference for authors of apocalyptic literature. These ancient poets of combat myths often revised the same basic story because “retelling one basic narrative in slightly different versions enabled ancients to reflect about the governance of the world and explain the course of history, especially the history of their own nation” (Clifford 2003, 26). The oft-reused, revised, or modified plot of the combat myth can be distilled to the following outline:

a force (often depicted as a monster) threatens cosmic and political order, instilling fear and confusion in the assembly of the gods; the assembly or its president, unable to find a commander among the older gods, turns to a young god to battle the hostile force; he successfully defeats the monster, creating the world (including human beings) or simply restoring the pre-threat order, builds a palace, and receives acclamation of kingship from the other gods. (Clifford 2003, 6)

Perhaps the most influential component of the combat myth as it pertains to the development of the genre of apocalyptic literature is its exploration of the themes of “cosmic threat and new creation” (Clifford 2003, 15). As is later emphasized in the book of Daniel, the book of Revelation, and other apocalyptic literature, the old and corrupt world must be destroyed in order to create the new and divinely ordered world. Just as
important, however, is the influence of the form utilized by those ancient authors of the combat myth. Because “ancient Near Eastern ‘philosophical’ thinking was normally done through narrative” (Clifford 2003, 26), the creators of apocalyptic literature may have been influenced to distinguish their writings from prophecy by assuming the characteristic form of their combat myth-writing predecessors. When viewed as a literary enhancement or maturation of the combat myth, therefore, apocalyptic literature can be considered “a narrative way of reflecting about theology, philosophy, and history, and of inculcating a way of life” (Clifford 2003, 6).

Biblical scholar Jean-Pierre Ruiz defines revelation, or apocalypse, as “a literary form in which a vision from God, often under the guidance of an angel or other heavenly messenger, communicates in symbolic language God’s hidden plan” (Ruiz 2007, 422). This definition becomes more intriguing when considering science fiction because “the more extreme versions of the fantastic voyage” subgenre, which would later come to be considered a precursor of science fiction, “overlapped with the standard format of religious fantasy, the dream story” (Stableford 2003, 15). In fact, many of the influences that led to the definition of science fiction as a genre are exceedingly comparable to those that led to the creation of apocalyptic literature.

The modern literary genre identified as science fiction drew influence from several existing literary categories, of which the utopian fantasy, the future war, and the scientific romance are most immediately identifiable. The earliest of these preexisting literary offerings, itself stemming from Thomas More’s *Utopia* in 1516, was the “utopian
fantasy, whose usual narrative form was the imaginary voyage” (Stableford 2003, 15). The imaginary voyage typically depicted a traveler or a small group of travelers visiting an isolated country, “a remote island or undiscovered continent . . . another planet, or the future” (James 2003, 219). In this distant locale, the protagonists of the utopian fantasy were free to observe, learn about, and assimilate foreign customs and exotic social practices; additionally, the traveler often distinctly noted or identified “the contrasts between the institutions of this ideal society and those of his own home” (James 2003, 220). In this way, creators of imaginary voyages attempted to illuminate the conditions, attitudes, and limitations of the societies in which they themselves lived by producing fictional worlds in which those conditions, attitudes, and limitations had been altered, adjusted, or removed. Writers of utopian fiction who opposed the tenets of capitalism, for example, created undiscovered communities that thrived by eliminating “money and private property, thus at one stroke removing greed, theft, jealousy and most causes of private strife” (Jones 2003, 220). It seems clear that crisis–or, as Rosen notes, perceived crisis–most often acted as the impetus for the creation of these utopian fantasies and imaginary voyages. Writers of science fiction would incorporate the conventions of utopian fiction into their stories not only to understand or criticize the circumstances of their own social settings, however, but also to create alternate visions of the future.

Literary critic David Ketterer suggests that these fictional attempts to understand the contemporary world represent “a response to abruptly changing social conditions” but that they may be equally relevant as a kind of contemporary prophecy (Ketterer 1974,
“If we are to live rationally, and not just for the moment,” Ketterer notes, “some attempt must be made to anticipate future situations” (Ketterer 1974, 24). The modern responsibility of imagining the future of human civilization seems to have fallen, in large part, to authors of science fiction. Perhaps this is one reason why the existing literary subgenre of the future war was so easily subsumed into the genre of science fiction. In 1871, British author George T. Chesney published a speculative “account of British defeat following a German invasion,” resulting in the creation of a “genre of future war stories that remained prolific until the outbreak of the actual Great War in 1914” (Stableford 2003, 22). Writers of future war stories took advantage of the subgenre’s creative leeway to invent imaginative and futuristic weapons ranging from “as-yet-non-existent arms and armour [to] . . . nuclear missiles and disintegrator rays” (Stableford 2003, 23). The majority of these British future war stories “took it for granted that ‘the war to end war’ would be won by the British,” although some of science fiction’s most famous authors, such as H.G. Wells, avoided this aspect of the subgenre specifically because of “the destruction that such a war might bring” (Stableford 2003, 26). Authors of future war stories often utilized “mock-nonfictional formats” and wrote first-person or memoir-style recollections of the wars they set in the future (Stableford 2003, 22). Such an approach would provide future authors of science fiction increased flexibility in terms of form. Perhaps most important, however, was the manner in which these stories of future war gained their great popularity. Stableford contends that “the crucial point in the evolution of future war stories arrived when they made the leap from propagandistic
pamphlets to serialization in a host of new popular periodicals, which entered into a
fierce circulation war in the 1890s” (Stableford 2003, 23). Britain’s periodicals and
America’s pulp magazines focused primarily on “garish melodramas [and] . . . the
commercial genres identified by the dime novels” (Stableford 2003, 29). Such
concentration of genre material allowed very specific subgenres to be promoted to an
exclusive and easily identifiable market. Because the yet-to-be-formed genre of science
fiction would eventually come to be regarded as a kind of “ghetto, as a cult or sect, as an
elect set apart from the literary, social, and cultural mainstream” (Kreuziger 1982, 15),
the magazines and serials in which future war stories initially gained popularity greatly
contributed to the creation of science fiction as an identified genre.

From the fantastic voyages of utopian fantasy, science fiction incorporated distant
locales, exotic civilizations, and contemporary social critique. The future war story
allowed authors of science fiction to embrace “the prospect of a destruction of
civilization” (Stableford 2003, 26). But the scientific romance, with representative
authors including Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, provided science fiction
with many of the characteristics and conventions for which the genre is commonly
recognized today. Until Edgar Allan Poe, a principal shortcoming of imaginary voyage
stories was that when they “found it convenient to cross interplanetary space their devices
became phantasmagorical, and dreaming remained the only plausible means of gaining
access to the future” (Stableford 2003, 16). Poe was one of the first authors to attempt to
use modern scientific achievements in order to provide verisimilitude to his works of
romantic adventure. Stableford contends that Poe’s “attempts to find literary means of communicating and celebrating the wonders of science became more varied and more inventive” throughout his career (Stableford 2003, 18). He would greatly influence authors such as Verne and Wells, who are more commonly recognized as the forefathers of science fiction. Verne famously imagined space travel in *From the Earth to the Moon*, advanced submarine technology in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, and is typically acknowledged for his “carefully constrained extrapolation of contemporary technology” (Stableford 2003, 20). Perhaps more than any other author, however, H.G. Wells can be said to have contributed the defining structural and thematic elements of science fiction. Wells holds this distinction primarily because of the extent to which he was aware “of the necessity of replacing the dreams as a means of exploring possible futures” (Stableford 2003, 24). He may have pursued a more scientifically-influenced approach to producing his speculative fiction principally because “the idea of mesmerically induced ‘true visions’ no longer commanded the least shred of plausibility” (Stableford 2003, 24). Still, he innovated what may be the most famous device ever created for a science fiction story: the time machine. Wells’s invention of the time machine “opened up the farther reaches of time and space to a kind of rational enquiry that had previously been severely handicapped by its reliance on obsolete narrative frameworks” (Stableford 2003, 24). The fact that Wells’s time machine was only marginally influenced by contemporary science may also, in a sense, have freed future authors of science fiction to be more creative and less concerned with precise scientific
verisimilitude; in essence, Wells not only provided the shape of the scientific romance, which “bestowed upon science fiction a sense of grandeur and wonder at the cosmos and its works” (Mendlesohn 2003, 264). He also set a creative standard for future authors of science fiction.

Stories by authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, which would later be considered forerunners of science fiction, often presented “visions of the future [that] . . . represented an attempt to peer into the heavens” (Mendlesohn 2003, 264). Authors of apocalyptic literature seem to have shared with these modern writers many of the creative aspirations and literary inspirations for recording in written form their social critiques. Kreuziger notes that “both science fiction and apocalyptic are considered to be marginal; that is, they exist on the margin of respectable fields of study: literature and theology” (Kreuziger 1982, 14). Yet science fiction and apocalyptic literature are clearly joined by more than their marginality. Though the genres and their inceptions are separated by thousands of years, their influences seem remarkably analogous.

Apocalyptic literature was heavily influenced by the works of the Jewish prophets, who “served as critics of the king in religious and social affairs [and] . . . influenced opinion through their pronouncements in the Temple courts” (Newsom 2007, 971). A direct comparison might be made between modern authors of utopian fantasy and these ancient prophets, who “interpreted international affairs, critiqued complacent religious practices, and condemned the abuses of social justice that accompanied the
increasing urbanization and centralization of state power” (Newsom 2007, 971). After all, authors of utopian fantasy strove to imagine “ways in which human society might be reorganized on earth [through] . . . legislation, education or institutional changes, occasionally changes in technology or environmental management” (James 2003, 227). In essence, both ancient Hebrew prophets and more modern authors of utopian literature critiqued the societies in which they lived and posited their own constructive alternatives.

Such attempts might also be compared to the works of Zoroaster, who “is the earliest known example of a particular kind of prophet–the kind commonly called ‘millenarian’” and who espoused in the Avesta “a total transformation of existence, a total perfecting of the world” (Cohn 1995, 27). Zoroaster cultivated in the religion that bears his name a sense of an ultimate force of good, asha, at perpetual battle against an ultimate force of evil, druj; in essence, Zoroaster maintained that asha and druj “embodied the forces that maintained the ordered world and the forces that strove to undermine it” (Cohn 1995, 25). Intriguingly, Zoroaster proposed his revolutionary concepts at a time when his society, “which had existed almost unchangingly for centuries, and which had never possessed very destructive weaponry, was coming into conflict with, and was being replaced by, a society of a new kind–more warlike and better equipped for war” (Cohn 1995, 26). Because Zoroaster lived in a period when newly-invented “chariots enabled chieftains and their bands of retainers to raid tribal settlements over wide areas, steal whole herds of cattle, [and] . . . kill human beings on a scale previously inconceivable” (Cohn 1995, 26), he must certainly have been cognizant of the
repercussions of technological advances in a manner similar to late twentieth-century authors of scientific romance. Most authors of scientific romances were “seriously concerned to explore future possibilities associated with the advancement of science and technology” (Stableford 2003, 26). And the typical science-fictional hero would come to be represented as the “tough, taciturn engineer who uses reason and practical know-how to solve seemingly insurmountable problems” (Attebery 2003, 38). This hero might be at odds with the protagonist of the Avesta, in which “the conscientious herdsman is presented as the righteous man par excellence, while the wicked man par excellence is the man who acquires fame and fortune by stealing cattle” (Cohn 1995, 27). Yet both the Zoroastrian sacred scriptures and stories of scientific romance clearly grapple with the ways in which scientific or technological advances affect society.

In many ways, future war stories are equally comparable to this component of Zoroastrianism. Certainly, authors of future wars also attempted to prognosticate the ways in which contemporary technology might be developed, enhanced, and utilized in the future; more specifically, they often extrapolated creatively futuristic weapons from existing military arms and dramatically inserted them into adventurous stories of speculative battle. At base, however, these stories of future war represented their authors’ patriotic attempts to situate the nations they inhabited within the existing social, ethical, and political conditions of the wider world. Science fiction would subsume the future war’s attention to nationalistic concerns and its presentation of armed conflict between a clearly defined—and often jingoistic—force of good against an invading force of
evil. In this sense, science fiction incorporated from stories of future war many of the same literary conventions that apocalyptic fiction absorbed from the combat myth. The combat myth’s influence was pervasive to the extent that it shaped the writings of those ancient Hebrew authors who in turn inspired the creators of apocalyptic literature. The psalmists, for example, sometimes adapted the combat myth in order “to celebrate the triumph of God over the forces of chaos” (Clifford 1995, 64). And the Jewish prophets, whose works so clearly shaped apocalyptic literature, “projected the conflict into the future and used the mythology to evoke the judgment of God” (Clifford 1995, 64). Even a succinct definition of the combat myth, in which some variety of evil “threatens cosmic and political order, instilling fear and confusion” in the populace (Clifford 1995, 64), might be applied just as appropriately to a late twentieth-century tale of future war.

A comparison of science fiction and apocalyptic literature presents several intriguing congruencies. This may be precisely why critics such as Frederick Kreuziger have approached science fiction as a “secular apocalyptic literature [that] . . . comforts and gives hope to those who are disillusioned by the failure of science and technology to deliver the world from ignorance, poverty, disease, famine, plague, war and death” (Kreuziger 1982, 15). If it is true, furthermore, that the twenty-first century’s “proliferation of science fiction [was] a response to abruptly changing social conditions” (Ketterer 1974, 24), then it seems reasonable to argue that authors of science fiction wrote their works for precisely the same reasons as their more ancient counterparts: to give warning, to critique society, to instill hope and provide guidance to a populace
unable to cope with that society’s changes, and to propose that a more perfect future exists for those who keep heart. It may be for this reason that some regard science fiction as “a form of faith, even a form of mysticism, that seeks to help us understand not only who we are, but who we will become” (McKee 2007, xiii).

An examination of the literary subgenres that led to the creation or stricter categorization of science fiction and apocalyptic literature reveals an even more startling level of compatibility between the two genres. At the confluence of these subgenres—the combat myth, the future war story, the scientific romance, the sacred Zoroastrian scriptures of the Avesta, the utopian fantasy, and the prophecy—might be found something that resembles modern post-apocalyptic fiction. Post-apocalyptic fiction often includes a struggle between forces of good and evil, a consideration of the creative and destructive capacities of technology, a deliberation upon the role of God in human history, and a promise that a paradise will imminently replace the torment of the ugly, contemporary world. Utilizing plots that focus on the survivors of some cataclysmic event that has decimated the world’s population, post-apocalyptic fiction confronts issues as diverse as “time and eternity, death and dying, ultimate meaning and judgment, cosmic conflicts, divine and demonic forces, [and] salvation and ultimate life” (Leigh 2008, 34). In order to more fully understand why “the popular imagination senses that science fiction is primarily concerned with tales of world disaster and atomic destruction” (Ketterer 1974, 124), however, one must investigate the text that has influenced post-apocalyptic fiction more than any other: the biblical book of Revelation.
It may seem practically unnecessary to assert that the book of Revelation can be considered the most influential antecedent of the modern genre of post-apocalyptic fiction; after all, its “opening word, ‘apocalypse’ or ‘revelation,’ which serves as a kind of self-designation, has become the name of a kind of writing and the ideas and themes associated with it” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 195). The statement becomes essential, however, upon recognizing that the genres have been classified under the broader and distinctly separate literary categorizations of religious text and popular fiction. Both ancient apocalyptic literature and modern works of post-apocalyptic fiction compel “us to explore the meaning of ultimate issues by using the analogical human imagination to incorporate symbolically the human mind and emotions in narratives of the limits of human experience” (Leigh 2008, 223). Both genres aim to provide hope to those who are struggling or unable to understand the nature of the times in which they live. And readers of either apocalyptic literature or post-apocalyptic fiction might find themselves presented with “an apocalyptic transformation [that] results from the creation of a new condition, based upon a process of extrapolation and analogy, whereby man’s horizons—temporal, spatial, scientific, and ultimately philosophic—are abruptly expanded” (Ketterer 1974, 16). This congruency validates critics such as Kreuziger, who argues that science fiction should be considered nothing less than “secular apocalyptic literature” (Kreuziger 1986, 15). In order to identify the conventions, symbols, and themes of modern post-apocalyptic fiction, however, a reader must confront and investigate the genre’s most
influential predecessor: the biblical book of Revelation. A consideration of the book of Revelation in terms of its authorship and setting, its most indelible images and symbols, and its structure and aims, will contribute greatly to an examination of the more modern genre of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Such a consideration might begin most appropriately by identifying the book of Revelation’s genre. Though Revelation is considered responsible for the classification of apocalyptic literature as a genre, this broader categorization still seems largely insufficient. Even the most recently attempted definition of apocalyptic literature struggles verbosely to encapsulate the genre as

a revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. (Leigh 2008, xxi)

Perhaps the difficulty arises from the fact that the book of Revelation itself combines literary modes as disparate as “letters, prophecy, liturgy, hymns, visions, [and] exhortations . . . within an overarching apocalyptic framework” (Leigh 2008, 23). And because over half of the verses in the book of Revelation “include one or more allusions to passages in the Hebrew Bible, or to its ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint” (Ruiz 2007, 420), the work must be considered not only within its New Testament setting but also for its relationship to the Hebrew biblical canon. As the concluding book of the Bible, Revelation can be read as “the final stage of a universal vision within the historical movement of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: from creation story to liberation story, from law to wisdom literature, from prophecy to fulfillment in Gospel, and finally from
pastoral letters to apocalypse” (Leigh 2008, 23). Yarbro Collins suggests, however, that we might regard the book of Revelation most appropriately as a letter (Yarbro Collins 2003, 197). For this reason, a strict identification of Revelation’s genre is intimately related to and perhaps less important than an understanding of its author.

While it is true that “some ancient authorities . . . have suggested that this is the apostle John, the son of Zebedee” (Ruiz 2007, 420), the contents of the biblical book don’t seem to provide any evidence that this is the case. Furthermore, because the name John “was not uncommon among Jews and followers of Jesus at the time, we may not simply assume that this John is John the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 195). Some contemporary biblical scholars have “argued that the book of Revelation was written pseudonymously, because pseudonymity is a typical feature of ancient Jewish apocalypses” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 196). This argument hinges largely on speculation that the book’s attribution to John must have “occurred either by mistake or as a way of increasing the authority of the book” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 196). But because the “author of Revelation never refers to himself as an apostle or a disciple of the lord” and in fact refers to himself in specifically prophetic terms in the book’s third verse (Yarbro Collins 2003, 195), he seems to have self-identified as a prophet. The tone of Revelation’s opening passage, in which John makes clear his intent to “mediate an intelligible message to his fellow Christians, a message that he claimed derived ultimately from God” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 196), seems to support this interpretation. Yarbro Collins suggests that the “most reasonable conclusion about the authorship of
Revelation is that it was written by a man named John who is otherwise unknown to us” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 196). Jean-Pierre Ruiz presents a more vivid portrait of Revelation’s author, however, when he argues that John’s “acquaintance with the Jerusalem Temple and its rituals [and] . . . his adoption of a literary genre that was familiar in Palestinian Judaism combine to suggest that John might have been a Palestinian Jewish Christian who fled to the Diaspora during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans” (Ruiz 2003, 420). If this assertion is accurate, then John’s personal past—and what might have been an intimate familiarity with a tremendously turbulent period of Jewish history—may have dramatically influenced his writing of Revelation.

Because the book of Revelation is most appropriately “read as an individual’s response to the age-old conflict between good and evil [and] a projection of hopes for a persecuted minority” (Pearson 2006, 66), an examination of the work must take into account that individual and the minority he aims to represent. John’s apparent self-identification as a prophet seems appropriate because of the Jewish prophecy that shaped him as an author. For centuries previous, the Jewish people had taken solace in “prophetic works due to their historical situation” (Pearson 2006, 25). Representing a distinguishable minority and a occupying “a small country, the Jews sought power through their mythmaking” (Pearson 2006, 25). Such mythmaking would likely have been intensified by the rise of a centralized and consolidated Israelite state in or around 1000 BC. Under King David and King Solomon, the capital of the Israelite nation, Jerusalem, represented “not just a political centre but also a religious one” (Pearson 2006,
Yarbro Collins asserts that in “antiquity there was no concept of a secular state; religious, social, economic and political aspects of life were closely intertwined” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 200-201). This was certainly true of Jerusalem, which was “imbued with a cosmic significance; the political and religious became one and the same” (Pearson 2006, 25). For an ancient Israelite who perceived the “fate of the city and the fate of the world [as] inextricably intertwined” (Pearson 2006, 26), a devastation inflicted upon Jerusalem could in a real sense be interpreted as a destruction of the entire world.

This is precisely what happened in the sixth century BC. Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and his army “invaded Jerusalem in 586, razing its city walls and burning Solomon’s temple to the ground” (Pearson 2006, 27). Because Solomon’s Temple represented so many different facets of Israelite society, its destruction consequently represented not just an obliteration of a sacred structure but also a devastation of Jewish civilization’s self-identification. After destroying the temple, Nebuchadnezzar forced the Israelite people into exile, marching them “2,000 km (1,240 miles) across the northern edge of the Arabian Desert, down the Euphrates to Babylon” (Pearson 2006, 28). This Israelite exile was largely responsible for the ways in which Babylon would later be used symbolically in apocalyptic literature; essentially, any depiction of Babylon “equaled oppression and humiliation” while Jerusalem represented “freedom and triumph” (Pearson 2006, 29). Such depictions were justifiable from the Israelite perspective, certainly, considering historic accounts of the city of Babylon. The city was an ancient metropolis where “religion was unashamedly polytheistic and artists’
imaginations were allowed free rein” (Pearson 2006, 28). It seems unsurprising that ancient Israelites would have been disgusted by the city’s lavishness; they themselves were forbidden even to “portray God in paint or wood or marble” (Pearson 2006, 28). If the purpose of apocalyptic literature “is to exhort its readers to maintain faith in the midst of trying times and to assure them that they will ultimately be rewarded for their faithfulness and that their enemies will be vanquished” (Rosen 2008, xii), then the genre’s development can be tied directly to the historical events that occurred following this Babylonian captivity.

In 539 BC, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great and his forces overran Babylon. It may be true in a historical sense that Babylon’s defeat can be considered to fall under the typical empiric pattern, in which “one imperial civilization succumbs to another in a ceaseless cycle of conquest and downfall” (Pearson 2006, 30). But because the defeat occurred within a lifetime of the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, Israelites could more easily mythologize it as the work of God. The defeat enabled Israelites to believe that “Babylon the Golden had been brought low, through the agency of Cyrus and his army, because God was working through history” (Pearson 2006, 30). Ancient shapers of Israelite history could thus argue that “Yahweh had been justly angry with the Jews for not being steadfast enough in their faith” but that when “they had returned to the straight and narrow . . . God had rewarded them by overthrowing their enemies and releasing them from their captivity” (Pearson 2006, 30). The Babylonian exile was responsible in this way for the birth of a new variety of theology based on “the conditional nature of the
promise made between the Jews and God” (Pearson 2006, 29). This new theology would allow for an increased artistic interpretation of God’s role in Israelite history. So when Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and recommence their customary worship practices, the Israelites surmised that God “had used Cyrus as the instrument of deliverance” in reward for their steadfast faith during the Babylonian captivity (Pearson 2006, 31). This tradition of incorporating God’s presence into historical events would become crucial to the works of prophets and authors of apocalyptic literature.

Because of his intimate familiarity with the Hebrew Bible and his status as a “Palestinian Jewish Christian who fled to the Diaspora during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans” (Ruiz 2003, 420), John would likely have been aware of the history and symbolic energy of Solomon’s Temple’s destruction and the Babylonian captivity. Furthermore and perhaps even more importantly, he himself would have been alive when the Second Temple was destroyed and during a period in which another imperial force was attempting to subjugate the Jews. The First Jewish Revolt against Rome took place during the years 66-70 BC and occurred for several reasons, including “corruption of and misrule by the Roman procurators of Judea, poor economic conditions in Judea and social divisions in Judean society, as well as Jewish religious and demographic expansion, intrinsic conflict between Judaism and Hellenism, Jews and gentiles, and Greek anti-Semitism” (Aberbach 2000, 79). The Jewish Revolt, which “started with riots in Ceasarea after the Jews there were deprived of their political equality . . . began as a national rising, changed direction to social revolution, and degenerated into civil war”
The Jews would have completed the construction of the Second Temple only years earlier, in 64 BC, and the rebuilt structure “stood in its magnificence for Jewish religious and national distinctiveness” (Aberbach 2000, 65). Historians therefore argue that “Rome’s hostility to Jews and its misrule of Judaea evidently reflects fear that Jews were swamping the Hellenistic cities of the empire, and that an increasingly attractive and powerful Jewish civilization might replace the Hellenism adopted by the empire” (Aberbach 2000, 77). The First Jewish Revolt ended in 70 CE when the Second Temple, which had been “transformed into a fortress, was burnt down” (Aberbach 2000, 32). Just as it had in 586 BC, the “destruction of the Temple meant the end of the political power of Judaism” (Aberbach 2000, 32).

Following Jerusalem’s fall in 70 CE, the Romans “stopped for all time Jewish sacrifices in the Temple, the sole place of Jewish sacrifice previously legal in the empire” (Aberbach 2000, 86). They used the temple as a station for the “Tenth Legion with the provocative emblem of a pig on its banner” (Aberbach 2000, 86). And perhaps most offensively, they “profaned the Temple area by sacrificing to their gods” (Aberbach 2000, 86). Roman religion was particularly distasteful to Jewish Christians because of the way in which it incorporated worship of the emperor. Because “the emperor was regularly associated with the gods and sometimes presented as a god himself” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 203), imperial cults existed in order to promote this variety of worship. Such a concept was drawn from the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian tradition of viewing “the king or pharaoh as a deity manifest or incarnate” (Yarbro Collins 2003,
The Greek tradition “of honoring the special dead with hero cults and of honoring living benefactors with religious rituals” would also have influenced and encouraged imperial cult worship (Yarbro Collins 2003, 203). But the extent to which imperial cults had been integrated into Roman society during John’s lifetime seems astounding. According to Yarbro Collins, there were “eighty imperial temples in sixty sixties in Asia Minor” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 204). For all intents and purposes, a Roman citizen would have been incapable of avoiding the influence of the imperial cult; religious “images of the emperor were often carried in processions [and] . . . many of the coins in use carried the portrait of the emperor, often depicted as Zeus, Apollo, or Hercules” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 204). Because it was a “ubiquitous and impressive phenomenon in the regions in which the seven cities of the book of Revelation were located” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 204), the imperial cult might have represented a dramatic motivation for John to undertake his creative work. When considering the social and historical factors that would have inspired John, from the Babylonian captivity to the construction of the Second Temple and the pervasiveness of the imperial cult of worship, the mysterious symbols and confusing imagery of the book of Revelation become far more comprehensible and far less perplexing.

The book of Revelation contains an abundance of puzzling or terrifying images. Some of these images may even be immediately recognizable to those who haven’t read the work, such as the four horsemen representing “military conquest, civil war, famine, and death” (Pearson 2003, 69). Some of the imagery, such as the seven stars and seven
lampstands of Revelation 1, manage to retain their mystery even after John specifies that “the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” to which the author writes (Rev. 1:20). John’s address to a star or an angel would have been identifiable in his own time as “a literary device through which the author can address each community as a whole, speaking in the name of Christ” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 200). For a modern reader, however, the peculiarity of the detail adds an additional layer of mystery to an interpretation of the text. Perhaps the most famous and significant images in the book of Revelation include the beasts that rise from the earth and sea, the whore of Babylon, the New Jerusalem, and Jesus Christ himself.

In Revelation 13, John describes two terrifying beasts: one that rises out of the sea and another that rises out of the earth. The first beast is described as having ten heads and seven horns, the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, the mouth of a lion, and a mortal wound that appears to heal itself. The second is described as performing “great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all” (Rev. 13:13). Despite the fact that the two beasts exist separately in the text, John essentially utilizes them for the same purpose: to provide “a highly negative redefinition of the imperial symbolic system” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 206).

The first beast rises from the sea, which functions not only as a mythic representation of chaos but also as an allusion to the fact that “Roman military force came from the Mediterranean” to destroy Jerusalem (Faley 1999, 116). The beast’s seven horns would have been understood to refer to “either the seven hills of Rome or the
seven major emperors (Faley 1999, 116). The first beast’s mortal wound most likely referred to the emperor Nero, who had committed suicide but “whose expected postmortem return was a popular belief” among Christians at the time (Faley 1999, 116). Adding another layer of depth to John’s symbolism is the fact that “the vision of the beast rising out of the sea is a rewriting and adaptation of the vision of the four beasts rising out of the sea in Daniel” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 202). The author of the book of Daniel wrote the apocalyptic portion of his text as a response to King Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who had “embarked on a particularly vicious repression of the Jews” and whose “attempt to realize Alexander’s vision of a Hellenistic world-empire involved ramming Greek culture down his subjects’ throats” (Pearson 2003, 37). The beasts in Daniel consequently represented the “predatory kingdoms” the book’s author aimed to criticize (Levine 2007, 1267). By utilizing the image of the beast in the book of Revelation, John is essentially “vouchsafing the authenticity of his vision by drawing on the earlier Jewish apocalypse” (Pearson 2003, 71). John intends for his beasts to personify Rome, however; the imperial cult’s ubiquity might be one reason why his beast is “portrayed as rebelling against God, as an adversary of God” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 203).

John’s second beast “deceives the inhabitants of the earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived” (Rev. 13:13). Faley asserts that this second beast should be viewed symbolically as a “false prophet, that is, a promoter or emissary of the great evil, the Roman Empire” (Faley 1999, 117). In this sense, the second beast can be considered subservient to the first beast, which
itself was provided its power and “throne and great authority” by a dragon that symbolically represents Satan (Rev. 13:2). Combined, the dragon and the two beasts of Revelation 13 can be considered a “trinity of evil” representing the Roman Empire (Faley 1999, 117). But the function of the second beast becomes more interesting when considering the mark it stamps on the hand or the forehead of citizens “both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave” (Rev. 13:16). The mark of the beast, combined with John’s reference to the “number of its name [equaling] six hundred sixty six” (Rev. 13:17-18), has provided innumerable authors, artists, and poets with an iconic symbol of absolute evil. As with most of the imagery and symbolism in the book of Revelation, however, the mark and number of the beast have their creative roots in more realistic elements of the Roman Empire. The mark of the beast in fact referred to the “coins in circulation in Asia [that] bore the image of the emperor with divine attributes and his name” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 205). Resultantly, the mark of the beast can be viewed as one more symbolic argument against the evil of worshiping the emperor over God. The number of the beast, which John reveals to be 666, refers again to Emperor Nero. Because “Hebrew and Greek letters served sequentially as numerals . . . the letters of any name may be added up, and the sum may be used cryptically to refer to the name or the person bearing the name” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 205). Combined with the fact that “the references to the beast from the sea allude to the legend about Nero’s death and return” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 205), it seems likely that the beast that rises from the earth also refers to the deceased emperor. Nero essentially functions as a direct antagonist to
and mirror image of the risen Jesus Christ. John creates a cosmic struggle between the forces of good led by Christ and the forces of evil commanded by Nero, who has been “transformed by his descent into the underworld into an opposing, transhistorical figure” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 205).

The beasts of Revelation 13 work on several symbolic levels; in addition to representing Rome and its structure of rule, the beasts also “recall Leviathan and Behemoth, primordial creatures that must be conquered by divine power” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 204). John clearly drew from diverse influences and meanings to create an indelibly critical image of Rome. The whore or harlot of Babylon functions in much the same way as a criticism of imperial rule. Introduced in chapter 17, the whore of Babylon wears gaudy clothes and jewels and is “drunk on the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (Rev. 17:6). Despite her presentation as a prostitute, the whore of Babylon indeed represents “the city of evil, Rome” (Faley 1999, 143). Once more, John may be looking to his creative influences when he characterizes Rome “allegorically as a great whore who fornicates with the kings of the earth” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 72). Hebrew prophets and poets who had already presented personifications of cities include Isaiah, who “exclaimed that the faithful city, Jerusalem, had become a prostitute” and Ezekiel, who “personified both Jerusalem and Samaria as prostitutes and defined their tributary alliances with other nations as prostitution” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 206). Consequently, the whore of Babylon’s “sexual relations with the kings refers to Rome’s idolatrous and godless practices” and represents not literal prostitution but “the epitome
of wanton godlessness in leading people from the truth” (Faley 1999, 143). Leigh suggests that, in literary terms, personified cities in apocalyptic literature are “always symbolic, suggesting forces of good or evil embodied in institutions or movements, and are not individual persons, nor is any necessary misogyny implied” (2008, 28).

The drunken and extravagant whore of Babylon can be considered “the demonic anti-type to the heavenly New Jerusalem” (Pearson 2006, 28). This New Jerusalem descends upon the earth “like a bride adorned for her husband” in one of the most memorable images of the entire book of Revelation (Rev. 21:2). John describes the city as emitting “radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clearly as crystal” (Rev. 21:11). Enormous in size and with twelve massive gates “representing the twelve tribes of Israel” (Faley 1999, 173), it represents a final victory for those who have remained faithful. In this “new Heaven on Earth . . . the saved will live eternally with God” (Rosen 2008, xiii-xiv). The “necessary correlation between the destruction of the world and the establishment of the New Jerusalem” now becomes increasingly apparent (Ketterer 1974, 7). This city descends from the sky to replace the “historical, earthy Jerusalem [that] lies in ruins” (Faley 1999, 172). Consequently, the city doesn’t simply represent “the Lord’s taking up his dwelling among his people in the final era” (Faley 1999, 172). It also represents a thorough condemnation of those who don’t commit to Christianity and provides a picture of what will happen to the unfaithful. Insofar as the New Jerusalem represents “a reward from God, an elitist and divisive gift that forever separates the damned from the faithful” (Rosen 2008, xxiii), the city acts as much as a warning as it
does as a promise. The world will be thoroughly destroyed and replaced for eternity by a heavenly city representing God’s ultimate victory.

The book of Revelation presents imagery that draws upon multiple layers of meaning to create almost impenetrably mysterious symbolism. Leigh suggests, however, that out of all the images of the book of Revelation, “the central one, Christ, appears as a sort of unification of all the apocalyptic symbols” (Leigh 2008, 26). Christ is represented not only as God but also as “fully human, especially as the Lamb” (Leigh 2008, 26). In Revelation 1, John describes Christ’s hair as white as snow and compares his eyes to the “flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14). Faley suggests that Christ’s “white hair points to his ageless state and his fiery eyes, to the searing and penetrating knowledge of God” (Faley 1999, 16). Essentially, John emphasizes the idea that God exists on earth through Jesus Christ’s humanity. John’s understanding of God is intricate in this manner, according to Leigh, in that it specifically incorporates

the Lamb, through whom the One brings about salvation from evil and death by means of the blood of the Cross, the central event in history, which concretizes and symbolizes the love of God and Christ, and who seeks the repentance and ultimate happiness of all persons in eternal union with the divine. (2008, 32)

In Revelation, God “is present to and through the Lamb, redeeming the world amid the conflicts and apparent defeats, bringing about the ultimate salvation now and in the future” (Leigh 2008, 31). As the lamb, Jesus “gains victory through his death, and as a result he redeems and creates from all peoples a new, ‘Christian’ people, an international community of kings and priests . . . who will reign upon the earth” (Thompson 1990, 59). When Christ is presented as a warrior mounted upon a white horse in chapter 19, he
functions as a military metaphor for this ultimate Christian victory. In his letters to the seven churches, John suggests that an “important reward for those who resist the beast, especially those who lose their lives because of such resistance, is a share in the first resurrection” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 208). And in each of these letters, John promises eternal life to “the one who conquers” (Rev. 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:28, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21).

Yarbro Collins suggests that “the notion of Christian victory in the book of Revelation is complex and paradoxical” but that John’s metaphor “has its deepest root in the experience and language of victory in battle” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 207). In essence, the image of Christ as a triumphant warrior “encourages the audience to stand firm in their loyalty to him” by honoring God and refusing to participate in imperial cult worship (Yarbro Collins 2003, 208). Presenting the risen Christ as a military leader “suggests his ability to liberate the people, to conquer evil, and to share the ultimate kingdom” (Leigh 2008, 26). John uses Christ symbolically throughout the book of Revelation–as the son of man, as the lamb, and as the rider upon the white horse–to show that “evil is ultimately and providentially overcome by God through the power of love in the Cross of Christ, and is ultimately eliminated from the universe” (Leigh 2008, 32).

The book of Revelation’s symbolic imagery, from the four horsemen of the apocalypse to the harlot of Babylon, seems impressive and mysterious enough on its own. But when such puzzling imagery is presented within an equally impenetrable textual structure, it becomes all the more peculiar. McGinn even argues that “interpretations of the structure of Revelation are almost as many as its readers” (McGinn 1987, 525). The
most immediately identifiable structural pattern or “organizing principle in the book of Revelation is the number seven: seven messages, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls are presented” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 198). Faley adds to these four categorizations by isolating the “seven harbingers of fate” in chapter 14 and the “seven final events” of chapters 19-22 (Faley 1999, 99). Yarbro Collins suggests that John might have used the number in this manner because, “according to late Pythagorean tradition and the Jewish exegete and philosopher Philo, all reality is ordered and that order expresses itself in patterns of seven” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 198). But by arranging the book around repetitions of seven, John essentially stymied both the interpreters who attempted to apply a linear plot upon the book of Revelation and the interpreters who argued that the work presented the same events “repeatedly from different points of view” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 198). As a result, analyses of the book’s structure sometimes incorporate both a linear plot and this more repetitive variety, which is known as the “recapitulation theory” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 198). Leigh, for example, contends that Revelation’s plot “follows the form of an upward moving spiral, from the current situation through apocalyptically imagined events from the Hebrew Scriptures and then from the New Testament to a final exhortation to fidelity to the Lamb in the time of conflict” (Leigh 2008, 26).

The difficulty of extrapolating meaning from the intricate structure and complicated imagery of the book of Revelation has led to a diverse collection of literary, religious, historical, and ethical interpretations. In order to make sense of Revelation, St.
Augustine adopted “a spiritual interpretation . . . which reduced the prophetic part of Revelation to the minimum and read the symbols as messages about moral conflict within each person and in the church in general” (McGinn 1987, 528). Joachim of Fiore claimed that he was provided the key for interpreting the book of Revelation through “divine revelation” (McGinn 1987, 528). He developed an analysis of the book “which showed in detail not only how the symbols of the book correlated with the major events of Church history, but also how they enabled the reader to see, at least in broad lines, what was to come” (McGinn 1987, 532). Two millennia worth of interpretations exist about the book of Revelation; McGinn asserts that “the insistence of many commentators, both early and late, that they alone have found the real key to this unveiling of the mysteries of the ends has served only to compound the enigma as history has demonstrated the errors or insufficiencies of various readings” (McGinn 1987, 523). But in a general sense, the contentions of St. Augustine and Joachim of Fiore seem to represent the approaches of most interpreters of the book of Revelation. There are those who, like St. Augustine, “experiment with more existential or immanent readings” (McGinn 1987, 523). Joachim of Fiore’s ideas about the book became “the standard food for millennial and apocalyptic imaginative literature for five hundred years” (Leigh 2008, 11). And his influence might still be felt in the present; after all, “millions of Christian fundamentalists read Revelation in a highly literal way as a blueprint for coming crisis” (McGinn 1987, 523). Because apocalyptic literature is “designed both to reveal (to believers) and to conceal (from the unworthy)” (McGinn 1987, 526), John’s message
might ultimately remain impervious to any absolutely comprehensive analysis. This simply suggests that the work will continue to be regarded as relevant for as long as it is read by "researchers who can with impunity discover in its pages the message they themselves put there out of a sense that so menacing a document, full of hitherto misunderstood detail, can have application only to the unprecedented world-historical crisis of their own moment in time" (McGinn 1987, 523-524).

John authored the book of Revelation during what came to be regarded as a dramatically turbulent period of religious history. His work reflects "conflict among Christians, conflict between Christians and Jews, and conflict between Christians and the representatives of Rome" (Yarbro Collins 2003, 207). He most likely set about writing the book of Revelation, therefore, in order to "interpret these conflicts and to resolve them in accordance with his own perspective" (Yarbro Collins 2003, 207). Despite the specificity of his aim, John helped to popularize a genre recognized for its cosmic themes and universal relevance. Apocalyptic literature, which "predicts a coming crisis that is to result in the destruction of the current order, the judgment of the living and the dead, and the subsequent establishment of a new, divinely governed order" (McKee 2007, 236), essentially functions both as a warning and as a promise. Those who fail to demonstrate faith in God and the ordered cosmos will be retributatively sentenced to death while those who remain loyal will be provided the chance to live beyond the grave. Insofar as it "invites courage, hope, responsibility, awe and a holding fast to the faith," the book of Revelation can in a real sense be considered the "science fiction of the Bible" (Kreuziger
Those works of science fiction that utilize most carefully the themes of Revelation fall logically under the subgenre of post-apocalyptic fiction. A consideration of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* will demonstrate how modern works of post-apocalyptic fiction utilize the themes, images, and symbols of biblical and apocalyptic literature to present similar warnings, similar promises, and similar appeals to steadfast faith.
CHAPTER 3: APOCALYPTIC IMAGERY AND BIBLICAL METAPHOR IN CORMAC McCARTHY’S THE ROAD

Cormac McCarthy has divulged that the moment he was motivated to write The Road “came a few years ago when he was in a hotel room in El Paso, Texas, with his young son who was asleep” (Conlon 2007). Looking out the window, McCarthy imagined “what the city might look like in 50 or 100 years” (Conlon 2007). From this kernel of inspiration, McCarthy developed the skeleton of a novel that would eventually earn him the Pulitzer Prize. In The Road, a father and his son, starving and alone, walk south through an American countryside that has been utterly devastated by an unspecified catastrophe. They select the southern coastline as their destination and believe that they may find a warmer climate and other humane survivors there. Along the way they must forage for the food that keeps them alive, avoid marauding gangs of cannibals, and attempt to make moral decisions in a world that no longer seems to recognize or require justice, integrity, or honesty. The Road may be the most acclaimed representative of post-apocalyptic fiction, a subgenre of science fiction that deals thematically with “time and eternity, death and dying, ultimate meaning and judgment, cosmic conflicts, divine and demonic forces, [and] salvation and ultimate life” (Leigh 2008, 34). Post-apocalyptic fiction frequently utilizes biblical imagery and symbolism as a result, drawing upon a corpus of ancient literature that two millennia of readers have consulted when considering these same universally relevant concepts. The congruency of the genres has led critics such as David Ketterer to argue that “if, at its most exalted level, apocalyptic literature is religious, the concerns of such a literature, at its most popular level, find
expression in the gothic mode and especially in science fiction” (Ketterer 1974, 15). A consideration of The Road’s crucial images—the beast within the father’s recurrent dream, the trout within his fading memory, and the unvarying presence of fire—reveals the way in which McCarthy not only draws upon biblical apocalyptic literature but also creates a larger design of biblical metaphor, as well.

Calling to mind the circumstances that inspired McCarthy to write the novel, The Road begins with a father waking from sleep to reach out and touch his sleeping son. Yet the image a reader might remember most vividly from this opening is not the father’s awakening but rather the dream that startled him to consciousness. In this dream the father “had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand” (McCarthy 2006, 4). McCarthy compares the geography of the cave to the “inward parts of some granitic beast” before proceeding to describe a more literal monster (McCarthy 2006, 4). The father and his son are confronted in the cave by a “creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead and white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (McCarthy 2006, 4). McCarthy presents this creature in gruesome terms, describing its “bowels, its beating heart [and its] . . . brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell” (McCarthy 2006, 5). By comparing the cave to a beast and then depicting it as the dwelling place of a monster, McCarthy effectively evokes the beasts of Revelation 13. After all, McCarthy’s beast emerges from a black and ancient lake while John declares that he has witnessed “a beast rising out of the sea” (Rev. 13:1). McCarthy’s beast “gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the
dark” (McCarthy 2006, 5) while John’s beast opened “its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven” (Rev. 13:6). Both beasts rise or emerge from dark bodies of water, exhibit their terrifying features, and emit some fearsome noise; a reader may be justified to extrapolate the meaning of one beast’s “low moan” from the other’s (McCarthy 2006, 5).

In Revelation, John utilizes his beasts to represent Roman imperial evil and to condemn the imperial cult, which emphasized worship of Rome and of Roman emperors over worship of God; the beast that rises from the sea is thus “portrayed as rebelling against God, as an adversary of God” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 203). In essence, John introduces his beast imagery to argue “that honoring the emperor was betrayal of God” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 204). The beast of The Road doesn’t appear to represent any specific governmental malevolence or societal practice; in fact, McCarthy essentially makes no reference to the circumstances that led to the destruction of the world. Still, McCarthy’s allusion to Revelation’s beasts functions to incorporate the mood of John’s critique and to infuse his own beast with the feel of a cosmic antagonist. Insofar as John’s beasts themselves “recall Leviathan and Behemoth, primordial creatures that must be conquered by divine power” (Yarbro Collins 2003, 204), McCarthy may also be alluding to these terrifying creatures of the book of Job. Behemoth is described there as “the first of the great acts of God” and represents a creature so fearsome that “only its Maker can approach it with the sword” (Job 40:19). Leviathan is even more formidable; God tells Job that “when it raises itself up the gods are afraid” (Job 41:25).
Behemoth and leviathan become even more allusively powerful for McCarthy’s novel when their function within the book of Job is considered. But they certainly aren’t the only elements of *The Road* that point a reader toward the “greatest Jewish work of art” (Mitchell 1986, vii). Both works feature protagonists persevering in worlds in which nearly everything has been taken from them. Job loses his children, his wealth, and becomes afflicted with oozing sores all over his body before lying “down with his face in the dust” to make his anguished misery known to his maker (Mitchell 1986, 7). Soon after he awakes from his terrifying dream, the father of *The Road* descends “into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time” (McCarthy 2006, 12). Here, the father is described as he kneels “in the ashes” and raises “his face to the paling day” to question God (McCarthy 2006, 12). In his pile of ash, Job comes close to cursing God and “allies himself with the primordial forces of darkness and chaos, and with the archetypical symbol of evil, the Serpent Leviathan” (Mitchell 1986, xiii). In almost identical fashion, the father points his finger toward what he perceives to be an absent God. Furthermore, both characters unleash their rage in the same, interrogative format. Job asks God why he didn’t die at birth, why he wasn’t “buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light” (Job 3:16). The father asks God if God has “a neck by which to throttle you” a heart, or a soul (McCarthy 2006, 12). He seems to inquire as exasperatedly as Job why there is “light for the wretched, life for the bitter-hearted, who long for death, who seek it as if it were buried treasure, who smile when they reach the graveyard and laugh as their pit is dug” (Mitchell 1986, 14). In this sense
Job and the father are the same in yet another way: neither man will succumb entirely to his misery by choosing death and taking his own life. And in both the book of Job and *The Road*, this opposite desire for eternal surrender is embodied in the character of a wife. Job’s wife tells him to “curse God, and die” (Job 2:9). The father’s wife compares death to a lover and tells her husband that her “only hope is for eternal nothingness” before cutting open her wrists with a flake of obsidian (McCarthy 2006, 57).

In this general sense, both *The Road* and the book of Job concern men who survive in destroyed worlds that force them to deliberate upon God’s nature and the design of God’s cosmic justice. Consequently, what Job comes to understand may provide insight for what the father believes in *The Road*. After everything he cares about has been taken from him in the book’s prologue, Job angrily defends his innocence to three unsympathetic friends, accuses his creator of iniquity, and demands to defend himself before God. In chapter 38, he is provided just this opportunity when God appears to him in the form of a whirlwind. God and God’s thunderous response, however, don’t provide Job an answer to the concerns he has expressed. Mitchell suggests that God’s response “reduces itself to this: *How dare you question the creator of the world? Shut up now, and submit*” (Mitchell 1986, xviii). Indeed, God presents Job with a bewildering “God’s-eye view of creation before man, beyond good and evil” (Mitchell 1986, xx). God gives Job a vision of the world “independent of human beings, which includes what humans might experience as terrifying or evil: lightning, the primordial sea, hungry lions on the prowl, the ferocious war-horse, [and] the vulture feeding his youth with the rotting
flesh of the slain” (Mitchell 1986, xx). As a result of his encounter with the divine, Job may reach a positive or optimistic understanding of cosmic justice. He may come to appreciate that good and evil coexist in the world, that the chaos perpetrated by the wicked is as much a part of the divine fabric as good deeds performed by the virtuous. In order to consider this recognition optimistic, Job must accept that God does not provoke or promote wickedness but instead recognizes and suppresses it; Job must be willing to consider that the “designer of this world is not a sage who promotes violence but one who contains it” (Habel 1992, 35). Chaos, evil, and wickedness will always exist in the world, but Job may acknowledge that God “subdued and organized chaos to enable the existence of the living world without threat of extinction” (Habel 1992, 35).

Then again, he may not. Job may come to a far more pessimistic conclusion. He may come away from his theophany believing more firmly and with more bitterness than ever that the universe “is not focused upon the human problem or the human moral construction of life” (Good 1990, 364). He may believe that “evil and good must be found simultaneously and personally in [God] if they are found anywhere” (Miles 1996, 327). As an extension of this belief, Job may conclude “that morality has no cosmic reverberations at all” (Good 1990, 356). Job’s entire complaint has been based upon the fact that he has lived an uncorrupted life and that the suffering he has been forced to endure is undeserved, unmerited, and unconnected to the moral and upstanding manner in which he has conducted his life. If God doesn’t consider human morality—if the human conception of right and wrong, wickedness and virtue isn’t contemplated on the divine
level—then Job’s complaint has been directed toward an uninterested, unconcerned opponent. The disheartening conclusion that Job may finally reach is that “a deity who is the source of human corruption is unlikely to acquit an uncorrupted human being” (Good 1990, 281). Having come face to face with a God who disregards human justice and whose considerations of right and wrong aren’t tied to human perceptions, Job may determine that there is no benefit to be found in virtue that is maintained “for nothing” (Job 1:9).

This paradoxical conception of God’s cosmic justice is communicated in large part through the beasts to which God refers in chapter 40 and 41: the behemoth with its “limbs like bars of iron” and the leviathan, whose “eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn” (Job 40:18, 41:18). Alter suggests that there “has been a certain amount of quite unnecessary confusion among commentators as to whether the subject of the second discourse is in fact zoology or mythology” (Alter 1985, 106). Within a more literary reading, it seems reasonable to assert that “both creatures are, in fact, embodiments of evil that the sky-god battles and conquers at the end of time, just as he conquered the sea and the forces of chaos in creating the world at the beginning of time” (Mitchell 1986, xxiii). Those who believe the behemoth and the leviathan to be zoological references typically argue that the beasts represent the hippopotamus and the crocodile, respectively. But the leviathan “appears in Chapter 3 as a mythological entity, and the word is clearly cognate with the Ugaritic Lotan, a kind of sea dragon” (Alter 1985, 106). And though “the argument for mythology is shakier for Behemoth because there is no extrabiblical
evidence of the term as a mythological designation” (Alter 1985, 106), the beast is still presented within a speech by God that has focused almost exclusively on members of the animal kingdom and the chaotic world they inhabit. Even if the behemoth is simply a hippopotamus, in other words, it functions in the same way as the other bloodthirsty animals God references to “make us see the inadequacy of any merely human moral calculus” (Alter 1985, 106). The leviathan is presented in more terrifying terms as “nature mythologized, for that is the poet’s way of conveying the truly uncanny, the truly inscrutable, in nature” (Alter 1985, 110). By incorporating this “magnificent, ungraspable beast who lives in the deep, who is master of all creatures of land and sea, who from his own, quite unimaginable perspective ‘sees’ all that is lofty” (Alter 1985, 110), the Job poet essentially establishes that chaos exists within the cosmic design and that God may be the only force powerful enough to contain or command it.

The leviathan of the book of Job differs from the beast of The Road in an exceedingly important way; it has this ability to “survey everything that is lofty” (Job 41:34). It can distinguish all of God’s creations, maintain its authority over them through its supernatural vision, and exhibit its fearsome power against anyone “so fierce as to dare stir it up” (Job 41:10). The eyes of McCarthy’s creature, however, are as “sightless as the eggs of spiders” (McCarthy 2006, 4-5). In the father’s dream, this beast swings “its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see” (McCarthy 2006, 5). McCarthy’s beast seems to represent chaos as thoroughly as the leviathan does within the book of Job, yet his force of unstoppable chaos lacks the power of sight. The
turmoil, disorder, and destruction for which it is metaphorically responsible are thus without aim and entirely indiscriminate. Its free and unrestricted reign is suggested when it “lurche[s] away and lope[s] soundlessly into the dark” without challenge (McCarthy 2006, 5). Job is exposed to a design of cosmic justice in which God “subdued and organized chaos to enable the existence of the living world without threat of extinction” (Habel 1992, 35). But the world of the father and his son has already been destroyed; the human race is already at risk of becoming extinct. And no divine force of good appears to establish itself over and above the blind beast and its chaos. Within the first words of The Road, Cormac McCarthy establishes a setting in which the old world has been destroyed, the forces of chaos roam unimpeded, and the presence or influence of God can’t be discerned. He does so through the image of the beast and its allusive reference not only to the books of Revelation and Job but also to their thematic weight.

It seems appropriate that the leviathan’s “breath sets coals ablaze [and that] . . . flames leap from his mouth” (Mitchell 1986, 87). A beast so evocative of unbridled chaos logically utilizes the force most representative of destructive power: fire. Fire and fire imagery abound in The Road, though McCarthy most often describes the destroyed world through ash, char, and smoke. In this post-apocalypse, the father and his son see “charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side” (McCarthy 2006, 8). They navigate around “fireblackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes” and are constantly aware of the “rich smell of woodsmoke” that fills the air (McCarthy 2006, 30-31). They struggle to make progress because of the “cake of ash
in the roadway inches deep and hard” (McCarthy 2006, 190). And the evidence of a massive conflagration persists in such evidence as the blacktop of the road that has “buckled in the heat and then set back again” (McCarthy 2006, 190). But even the cause of the world’s destruction is described only as a “long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy 2006, 52). And the father utilizes a medical term for the excessive accumulation of fluid in body cavities when he looks upon a dead swamp and refers to it as a “sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular” (McCarthy 2006, 274). This world seems to have been destroyed by an all-consuming fire that has all but extinguished. Fire in *The Road* is presented far more often as a tool for survival, such as when McCarthy devotes careful attention to the way the father “piled on more wood and bent and blew gently at the base of the little blaze and arranged the wood with his hands, shaping the fire just so” (McCarthy 2006, 72). In this way, McCarthy directs a reader’s attention not only to the element’s practical purpose but also to its paradoxical nature. A consideration of fire’s role in Revelation and the Bible may reveal its function in *The Road*, as well.

The most vivid utilizations of fire in Revelation come near the book’s conclusion when a rain of fire falls from Heaven and consumes Satan and his army (Rev. 20:9). The final battle between Christ and the world’s forces of evil is never actually presented; Satan is simply “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, as well, essentially ridding the new
world of all evil (Rev. 20:14). The old and sinful world is cleansed of evil through fire and replaced with a new and perfect one inhabited by the faithful and innocent. What the sinful and wicked experience in the lake of fire represents a second death, “a final condemnation . . . that is reserved for the unrepentant malefactors” (Faley 1999, 165). This imagery seems perfectly appropriate for the world of The Road, as well. Its landscape, peopled by a repulsive array of cannibals, murderers, and child rapists, resembles quite closely the biblical lake of fire. Such a pessimistic reading would effectively condemn the novel’s protagonists, however. The seven trumpets of Revelation 8 may be more pertinent to the post-apocalyptic setting McCarthy establishes in The Road.

The devastation released by Revelation’s trumpets and the destruction that has been inflicted upon the world of The Road are exceedingly comparable. Altogether, in fact, the “effects seen in Revelation and The Road include fire from heaven, the trees and the grass burned up, ships destroyed, all sea life dead, the sun and the moon blotted out, plagues and earthquakes, [and] cities full of unburied dead people” (Grindley 2008, 12). Specifically, the first trumpet releases “hail and fire, mixed with blood” that burns up the earth, its trees, and its green grass (Rev. 8:7). The second sets loose “something like a great mountain, burning with fire” that drops into the ocean and turns it to blood, killing aquatic life and destroying ships (Rev. 8:8). The third unleashes “a great star . . . blazing like a torch” that contaminates rivers, springs, and all apparent sources of fresh water (8:10). Each of these tremendously destructive forces incorporates fire. But the
references to the natural world are equally as significant when considered alongside a work written by Cormac McCarthy, an author who has always paid precise attention to the ecology and geology of the worlds his characters inhabit.

McCarthy has set several of his novels, including *Outer Dark*, *Suttree*, and *Child of God*, in the Appalachian location in which *The Road* most likely takes place. As a result, he may incorporate subtle intertextual references to these other works, such as when “the travelers cross a bridge that may well be Knoxville’s Henley Street Bridge, a talismanic structure in *Suttree*” (Chabon 2007). Literary critic K. Wesley Berry notes that McCarthy’s fiction has typically included a variety of ecological measurements: geological records (for instance, the hundreds of millions of years of sea life piled on the land when it was covered with water, and whose corpses decayed in the wealth of mineral matter underlying the present-day mountains) and riparian history. (2002, 48)

*The Road* is only McCarthy’s most recent work to include a harsh and brutal world; a majority of his characters “walk through wastelands, but they occasionally traverse a marginal landscape where a scarred, abandoned farm or eroded hillside abuts a healthy forest” (Berry 2002, 58). In this sense, McCarthy’s representation of the natural world has always served an apocalyptic purpose. Before *The Road* had even been published, for example, Berry asserted that “McCarthy’s prose implies a vision of ecological holocaust, as if the collapse of the earth as we know it lurks in the near future” (Berry 2002, 55). His violent descriptions of the natural world function to “project an eerie prophecy of the next great extinction” (Berry 2002, 69). And of course, he would go on to portray this next great extinction in *The Road*. In both Revelation and *The Road*, the
natural world is destroyed by fire and made cold, desolate, and cruel for those few who are left over to inhabit it. When McCarthy describes a “vast low swale where ferns and hydrangeas and wild orchids lived on in ashen effigies which the wind had not yet reached” (McCarthy 2006, 276), he creates layers of intertextual significance not only between The Road and his earlier novels but also between The Road and Revelation, where “a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up” (Rev. 8:7). Through his descriptions of burned-out forests destroyed by a world-ending fire, McCarthy alludes not only to his own works in which “the life span of Homo sapiens seems relatively inconsequential” but also to a biblical work in which evil and amoral humans experience eternal punishment through fire (Berry 2002, 69).

Revelation isn’t the only biblical work to depict fire as an implement of divine justice. The second chapter of Lamentations, for example, reveals that fire is an “ideal divine weapon [because] its size supersedes human weapons as well as the human environment” (Labahn 2006, 245). Here, fire functions primarily to represent God’s unequaled might and unparalleled strength. It may be more noteworthy, however, that God rains this fire upon Israel “as a reaction to the people’s transgressions of the law” (Labahn 2006, 249). God uses fire that is “caused by the divine anger” explicitly for its capacity to produce massive and terrible destruction (Labahn 2006, 249). The devastation of The Road’s world seems to have been caused by just such a force of divinely-guided rage. One might reasonably argue that a “barren, silent, [and] godless”
world couldn’t have been destroyed by God (McCarthy 2006, 4). But God doesn’t appear on earth in Lamentations, either; God unfurls fiery destruction from heaven and “the use of God’s instrument allows him to uphold his transcendence” (Labahn 2006, 248). The fires of Lamentations might thus function as a kind of backdrop or echo for the fires of *The Road*. Another piece of biblical literature might be even more significant when considered alongside McCarthy’s novel, however, because it also includes a father, a son, and the elemental force of fire.

In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Gen. 22:2). Because of the historical circumstances during which the text was written, scholars contend that Genesis 22 “functions as a signal of the abolition and rejection of human, specifically child, sacrifice among the ancient Israelites” (Boer 2000, 146-147). After all, Abraham is prevented from murdering his only son when God “averts the sacrifice at the last minute in favor of a ram” (Boer 2000, 146-147). Yet God rewards Abraham’s readiness to slit Isaac’s throat and burn him to death by promising to bless him with “offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17). For this reason, biblical scholar Roland Boer asserts that Genesis 22 “yields forth a tension between human sacrifice as the highest good, the purest form of devotion to God, and as something to be avoided, as evil” (Boer 2000, 147). In a sense, the text allows for a reading in which “only obedience to God, even to the point of human sacrifice, enables the perpetuation of
life as a reward for such devotion” (Boer 2000, 148). The story of Isaac’s binding, therefore, argues that the “alternative value to sacrifice is human life, particularly in the form of descendents” (Boer 2000, 148). Despite one critic’s contention that “The Road is the anti-Akedah—the story of a faithless father who refuses to sacrifice his son on an altar built to his own atheism” (Grindley 2008, 18), McCarthy’s novel might make an argument for faith as intensely as Genesis 22. *The Road* places similar emphasis on life’s perpetuation, after all, and communicates this emphasis largely through the image of fire.

The relative lack of destructive fire imagery in *The Road* is made more obvious by the ways in which fire is used allusively and constructively within the novel. McCarthy describes sparks that “rushed upward and died in the starless dark,” calling to mind Eliphaz and his assertion that “human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward” (McCarthy 2006, 31; Job 5:7). The father “blew the flames to life,” mirroring the action of Genesis 2 in which God “formed man from the dust of the ground . . . and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (McCarthy 2006, 74; Gen. 2:7). The father is described in meticulous detail as he “piled on more wood and bent and blew gently at the base of the little blaze and arranged the wood with his hands, shaping the fire just so” (McCarthy 2006, 72). He builds fire, controls fire, wields fire, and depends upon fire for its ability to preserve his life and the life of his son. But fire clearly represents something more to these two main characters. The son repeatedly demands confirmation from his father that they are “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 2006, 83). And the father uses his affirmative responses to reassure his son that “nothing bad is going to happen”
(McCarthy 2006, 83). The father may use the image of fire because it is “less abstract that the word ‘light’ and may convey the concept of spirit in a way the boy can grasp, but in the context of the still burning holocaust of the world it represents at least the sacred fire of human spirit, in opposition to the demonic fires of apocalypse” (Schaub 2009, 161). And while it may be true that a “reader cannot shake the suspicion that the father’s repeated assertion . . . is a strategy rather than a belief, a recourse to religious language and forms in the absence of any foundation for them in the world” (Schaub 2009, 161), this strategy is nonetheless rooted in the father’s faith that his son’s continuing life represents also a persistence of morality, goodness, and decency. In fact, the father himself has already compared his son’s blond-haired head to a “golden chalice, good to house a god” (McCarthy 2006, 75). In a sense, the fire the boy believes himself to be carrying represents a literal prolongation of God’s presence in the destroyed human world. And for the father, it seems true that by “sustaining his son’s breath, he sustains not only his own capacity for life but for some belief in life’s continuance, in the value of life” (Schaub 2009, 158).

This concept is only reinforced as the father faces his impending death and then succumbs to it. He has struggled throughout the novel with the thought that he might have to kill his son to prevent him from being raped, murdered, and cannibalized. At one point, he has even put a gun in his child’s hand and taught him how to “put it in your mouth and point it up [and to] do it quick and hard” (McCarthy 2006, 113). In the end, however, he finds he is incapable of taking his boy’s life. He simply can’t “hold [his] son
dead in [his] arms” (McCarthy 2006, 279). So he tells his son that the fire is inside him and that it was always there. He instructs him that “if I’m not here you can still talk to me” (McCarthy 2006, 279). And he teaches him that he will “have to make it like talk that you imagine” but that the boy will hear him if he practices at it (McCarthy 2006, 279). For all intents and purposes, the father is teaching his son to pray, to believe in a life or existence beyond death, and to look to his father as an example of living rightly. He is encouraging his son to keep faith.

The boy appears to do so when he encounters a man in the road, a “veteran of old skirmishes, bearded, scarred across his cheek and the bone stoven and the one eye wandering” (McCarthy 2006, 282). Excluding his father, the kindest men the boy has known have been desperate, starving, or at a minimum almost unbearably wretched. So a reader is justifiable wary of this intimidating man, perhaps most obviously because “when he spoke his mouth worked imperfectly, and when he smiled” (McCarthy 2006, 282). Nonetheless, the boy asks the man if he, too, is carrying the fire. By interrogating this stranger, “the boy perpetuates the catechism of the father” and demonstrates that he will carry his father’s spirit and morality forward (Schaub 2009, 164). A reader soon discovers that the stranger has a family of his own and appears sincere in his claim that he also carries the fire. In this sense, the father’s reward for his faith in an incomprehensible force of good may be that his son finds in another decent family a chance for continued survival. Indeed, it is hard to see The Road as “the story of a faithless father who refuses to sacrifice his son on an altar built to his own atheism”
Abraham may differ in his apparent willingness to sacrifice his son, but he has come to recognize as intimately as the father of *The Road* the true nature of God’s cosmic design. In both works, the persistence of a child’s life extends also the existence of a petulant, destructive, and unpredictable deity.

Some of McCarthy’s imagery in *The Road* seems to point allusively in more than one direction; the beast that opens the novel may refer to the biblical beasts of Daniel, Job, and Revelation but might also suggest “the ‘rough beast’ from Yeats’s ‘The Second Coming’” (Schaub 2009, 154). The fire that has destroyed *The Road*’s world seems to carry biblical significance, yet a modern reader might be as likely to imagine man-made nuclear winter as the book of Lamentations. Consequently, *The Road* often allows room for both a sacred and a secular interpretation. This is certainly true of the father’s encounter with a stranger named Ely. The prophetic book of Malachi describes a day “burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble” (Mal. 4:1). On this day the world will be left with “neither root nor branch” and the wicked will become “ashes under the soles” of the feet of the righteous (Mal. 4:1-3). Here again, fire is presented as God’s tool for the destruction of the human world; the passage could be considered relevant to *The Road* for this reason alone. Yet Malachi concludes with a promise that God will send “the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Mal. 4:5). Elijah’s presence before the end of the world will function to “turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents” (Mal. 4:5). McCarthy seems to be incorporating Malachi’s end-time scenario into *The
Road; Ely’s arrival, after all, signals a kind of turning point for the father and his son. The boy gives food to Ely, who thinks he must be willing to do so because he “believes in God” (McCarthy 2006, 174). While the father admits that he doesn’t know or understand what his son believes, he “has come to recognize that the boy has values that transcend mere survival, and that they are fundamental to the boy’s character” (Schaub 2009, 162). Once more, the allusion to Elijah’s arrival seems clear. But McCarthy’s Ely claims that “there is no God” (McCarthy 2006, 170). And when the father inquires what Ely would think if he told him that his son was a god himself, Ely responds that he’s “past all that now” and argues that “where men can’t live gods fare no better” (McCarthy 2006, 172). He even reveals that Ely isn’t his real name and that he doesn’t “want anybody talking about [him]” (McCarthy 2006, 171). McCarthy manages to integrate the biblical fire of Malachi and its apocalyptic weight while at the same time avoiding the complications a more literal reading might create. In a sense, the fire of The Road comes to mirror the paradoxical nature of biblical fire, which is used both by God to destroy and by humans to praise God.

Another biblical passage that emphasizes fire also introduces an image that is exceedingly important to The Road. The gospel of Matthew describes the end of the world as a time when “the angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:49-50). The preceding verses have compared these human representatives of good and evil to fish—and their capture to the act of fishing.
Specifically, Matthew 13 reveals that “the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad” (Matt. 13:47-48). *The Road* utilizes vividly unforgettable imagery of beasts and fire, yet the novel’s most important image may be the fish. And the significance of fish in *The Road* might be tied directly to the presence of fish in biblical source material.

Fish are mentioned specifically three times in *The Road* and twice in memories of the father. The father recalls a time when he “stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam” (McCarthy 2006, 30). From this vantage point he watched “trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (McCarthy 2006, 30). Schaub suggests that McCarthy utilizes the image of the trout to tap “into a commonplace of American writing, of fishing in America” (Schaub 2009, 156). He asserts that “the act of fishing is an act of communion, at once expressive of a relation to Nature and the recovery of spiritual equilibrium” (Schaub 2009, 156). It may be true that McCarthy’s reference is primarily toward existing American literature in which “the retreat to the country–in America, the retreat to wilderness–is an act of communing once more with the medium of the spirit” (Schaub 2009, 156). After all, the world in which the father now lives no longer allows for such a communion; no evidence of plant or animal life appears to remain. Here again we are reminded that McCarthy’s fiction has previously implied “a vision of ecological holocaust, as if the collapse of the earth as we know it lurks in the near future–a
devastation spurred by our fossil-fuel-driven, hurry-up economy of fire” (Berry 2002, 55). Yet this ecological devastation has unmistakably theological implications. Because communion with nature is no longer an option for the father, he has no direct access to the divine except in the world of his memory. Schaub argues that The Road “poses the question of what access we might have to spirit once those natural signs are obliterated; or, if obliteration itself be our last remaining sign – fire, ash, cannibalized remains – what spirit does it symbolize?” (Schaub 2009, 155). In this way, The Road’s God exists both in the world of the father’s memory and in the world that will come to belong to his son, a world of charred and ashen destruction. The father’s memories will die when he does and, in a sense, so will the existence of his God.

That the God of this post-apocalypse is somehow different from the father’s God seems to be reinforced by his second memory of fish. The father recalls when “he’d stood at a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the teacolored water except as they turned on their sides to feed” (McCarthy 2006, 41-42). Importantly, these trout reflect “back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (McCarthy 2006, 41-42). The sun or sunlight might certainly be interpreted metaphorically as God or God’s presence in the human world; the trout, through their capacity to reflect this sunlight, act as natural signals of the divine. In effect, the father perceives in the sunlight reflected off the trout’s scales the existence of God in the world. But no sun shines on the world in which his son has grown up. No fish swim in the pools of water that prompt his recollections. Consequently, no signal of God’s presence can
enter this human world or be discerned by human eyes. McCarthy reinforces this notion by describing the father as he “dropped a white stone into the water but it vanished as suddenly as if had been eaten” (McCarthy 2006, 41). Schaub argues that the stone’s “disappearance within the ash-laden water may be said to swallow the reference of depth and transparency available for symbolization throughout human time” (Schaub 2009, 156). But by illustrating the stone’s quick disappearance as a swallowing-up–and then proceeding to describe fish that reflect light like the knives in a cave–McCarthy also directs a reader back to the cave of his novel’s opening pages and the beast that dwells there. This union of imagery seems to suggest metaphorically that the fish, as a natural symbol of God’s existence, has been consumed by a great beast signifying chaos, destruction, and disorder. A reader will be presented with the image of this cave one final time near the novel’s conclusion. The dying father, apparently hallucinating, seems to perceive the following:

a fading light . . . The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stones. Tracks of unknown creatures in the mortified loess. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they had carried with them. (McCarthy 2006, 280).

Here in the cave where God’s existence itself seemed to have been swallowed like a stone, the light of the boy’s fire persists against the encroaching darkness. If God’s existence will persevere in this destroyed world, consequently, it will do so through the existence of the boy and the light he carries.
Soon after the father’s death, *The Road* concludes, as well, with the image of fish swimming in a stream. An unidentified narrator tells us that “once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountain [and that] . . . you could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow” (McCarthy 2006, 287). These “polished and muscular and torsional” fish “smelled of moss in your hand” (McCarthy 2006, 287). The unnamed narrator concludes:

> 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. (McCarthy 2006, 287)

It may be that “McCarthy closes his novel with a master topos of western belief . . . as a kind of epitaph for the world’s body” (Schaub 2009, 159). Given McCarthy’s attention to ecological concerns, a reader might be justified to believe that the final image of the trout functions as “an admonitory epitaph of what could yet be lost” if we don’t curb our destructive habits (Schaub 2009, 158). The novel would become a narrower critique of environmental exploitation in such a reading, however, and would seem to lose some of its capacity for more extensive symbolic significance. It seems more intriguing to focus on the novel’s final word, mystery, which in “the religious sense of the word . . . is a truth known only by revelation and cannot be fully understood” (Schaub 2009, 166). McCarthy seems once more to be alluding to the Bible or to a more broadly theological significance. A consideration of the theological importance of fish, then, may reveal the importance of the image’s use within *The Road*. 
The outline of a fish is still utilized contemporarily as a symbolic representation of Christian faithfulness; it can be seen depicted regularly on bumper stickers, magnets, and in jewelry. This modern utilization seems as fashionable or trendy as it does theologically significant despite the fact that the fish “antedates the cross as a Christian symbol” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 21). This may be because the symbol’s more ancient importance is comparatively obscured. A popular belief repeated by present-day faithful is that early Christians utilized the fish symbol for its acrostic representation of “the Christological formula . . . ‘Jesus Christ God’s Son, Saviour’” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 21). In fact, the acrostic significance of the fish symbol emerged only “by the third century [and] . . . it also seems clear that the fish symbol preceded the acrostic formula” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 21). Prior to assuming an acrostic significance, the fish symbol was frequently carved or otherwise imprinted on early Christian burial sites, suggesting “that it somehow provided assurance of hope for the future of the living and the dead” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 23). For the early Christian faithful, then, fish represented symbolically “the sense of hope for the future life of the deceased, if not for reunion in the resurrection or coming age” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 23). Several scholars even contend that “early Christians understood the fish in connection with the eucharist, and the eucharist in connection with the hope for resurrection or immortality and life in the messianic age” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 23). The contemporary utilization of the fish symbol as a bumper sticker or sellable trinket seems to suggest that it has become just “one more Christological symbol like the cross and the chi-rho”
despite the fact it preserves, “in a generalized sense, the hope of salvation for the faithful” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 48). Its more ancient meaning has essentially been lost; within modern Christianity it may therefore be inconsequential that “for Jesus himself or for quite early, and probably, Jewish Christians, the meal of bread and fish, of which we learn in the gospels, was understood as a Eucharistic anticipation if not epiphanic participation in the blessed life of table-fellowship in the Kingdom of God” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 46). Such an apocalyptic reading might seem bizarre to modern sensibilities, but it is certainly relevant for a more thorough understanding of McCarthy’s *The Road*.

The story of Jesus’ wilderness feeding of the five thousand may contain the most famous utilization of and reference to fish in the entire biblical corpus. After all, the feeding of the five thousand is “the only miracle recorded by all four Gospels” (Jenkins 2007, 157). In magnificently vivid fashion, Jesus orders the gathered thousands to sit down on the grass as he takes up the loaves of bread and fish, “looked up into heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds” (Matt. 14:19). All eat and are filled by only five loaves and two meager fish (Matt. 14:20). Along with healing the sick, walking on water, and raising the dead, Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand seems to establish him as a truly divine figure capable of producing genuine miracles. Yet it may be true in a more narrowly historical sense that “what Jesus was distributing was eschatological food, conveying assurance of participation in, if not sacramentally sealing the recipients for, the life to come of the
coming Kingdom of God” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 27). Jesus emerged from the ministry of John the Baptist, whose apocalyptic “message was an urgent call for the people to repent before the day of the Lord comes so that they might join the Lord in his great victory” (Baumgartner 1999, 17). And “some Jews, particularly those in apocalyptic circles, expected that fish would be the main dish at the Messianic banquet” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 37). It may be true, therefore, that the feeding of the five thousand represented “a symbolic prefiguration if not inauguration of the messianic banquet, that time when the righteous would eat bread, but particularly fish, in the Kingdom of God” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 37). It may seem contemporarily unsuitable to place such an apocalyptic significance upon fish; in fact, it may be true “that the continuance of the fish-symbolism for so long after the Gospel had spread far beyond Galilee is not unconnected with the indelible memory of how the Lord had taken bread and fish and made them into miraculous symbols of the sharing of his own divine life with the ‘multitude’ on their pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world’” (Richardson 1955, 147-148). Yet if Jesus’ belief in the coming of the Kingdom of God is understood as apocalyptic—and if early Christians regarded fish as a standard Eucharistic element—then it seems justifiable to argue that the feeding of the five thousand might have been considered by its participants “a foretaste of the messianic banquet” (Hiers and Kennedy 1976, 27). Richardson contends that, at minimum, the “prominence of the fish-motif in the symbolism of the apostolic church bears undeniable testimony to the historicity of the Gospel and to its actual beginnings in Galilee amongst a company of
which the leading members had been fishermen who had left their nets” (Richardson 1955, 147). Yet even this reference to the profession of some of Jesus’ disciples may have a more apocalyptic significance than is typically recognized by modern-day faithful.

McCarthy leaves ample room for speculation when he reveals that “the clocks stopped at 1:17” on the day the world of *The Road* was destroyed (McCarthy 2006, 52). One critic believes this numerical specificity functions as an “allusion to Revelation 1:17, which introduces Christ’s theophany to John the Divine: ‘And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last’” (Grindley 2008, 12). Yet it seems possible given the novel’s frequent utilization of fish imagery that the numbers refer to the gospel of Mark, in which Jesus recruits Simon and Andrew to his ministry by asking the future apostles to “follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:17). Modern-day Christians seem to ignore the idea that “the figure is in many respects inappropriate if the mission of the disciples is thought of as rescuing men or bringing them to salvation” (Smith 1959, 187). While a fishermen’s success can be measured by how many fish he catches, in other words, the end result for the captured fish tends to be the same: death. The fact that the fishers of men image “lacks the eminent suitability of the more widely used Biblical metaphor of the shepherd seeking the strayed sheep” suggests that its usage carried a different meaning for Jesus’ early followers (Smith 1959, 187).

Some commentators have argued that “we should look for an explanation of ‘fishers’ in the background of ‘old cosmogonical myths’ in which the waters represent
chaos, an enemy to be subdued and which may be equated with the pit of the underworld” (Smith 1959, 188). In such a reading, the disciples’ willingness to assume the mantle of fishers of men “involves no play on words but refers to the task of saving mankind in language suitable to the mythical understanding of the sea” (Smith 1959, 188-189). In *The Road*, however, the ocean–and more generally water itself–is never truly presented in chaotic or terrifying terms. In fact, the father and son seem to thoroughly enjoy themselves when they stumble upon a waterfall. McCarthy describes the father as he teaches his son to swim, as he “held him and floated about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water” (McCarthy 2006, 39). When they finally reach the coast, where they had hoped to find a warmer and more hospitable climate, the father and son find only a “cold [and] desolate [and] birdless” seaside terrain (McCarthy 2006, 215). Nonetheless, the son frolics once again in the water, “running naked and leaping and screaming into the slow roll of the surf” (McCarthy 2006, 218). Water isn’t presented as a symbol of fearsome and unstoppable chaos; in truth, it appears to provide the father and his son a sense of solace, of freedom. It is as though McCarthy intentionally subverts the normal symbolic significance of the ocean in order to draw a reader’s attention to the fact that this thematic significance holds no meaning in a destroyed world. The ocean as a signifier of unbridled chaos is unnecessary in a world full of unbridled chaos.

This concept of ideas losing their meaning and significance–of “the world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities”–becomes absolutely essential to *The Road* (McCarthy 2006, 89). The father mourns “the names of things slowly
following those things into oblivion” and emphasizes that these losses will include “the names of things one believed to be true” (McCarthy 2006, 89). McCarthy’s potential allusion to the biblical fishers of men might function to reinforce this sense of loss; the title’s apocalyptic significance for the original disciples, after all, carries little to no meaning for most contemporary readers or Christians. Early Christians may have understood that Jesus was “summoning the men in question to serve as agents of the Kingdom of God now announced to be at hand, that they are to gather a people for judgment as the term ‘fishers of men’ initially suggests” (Smith 1959, 195). And Jesus may have used the term fishers of men specifically as

a promise of fulfillment, another indication of the maturing of the eschatological time, a discreet application of the general announcement of the time fulfilled, the Kingdom at hand, a promise that the judgment anticipated will begin and that men may be selected to share in the gathering of the people for this purpose. (Smith 1959, 196)

The function of Jesus’ disciples–his fishers of men–was thus “to go where he goes, and to gather the people for the impending event” (Smith 1959, 201). Smith argues that the writing of the gospels resulted in “a complete change from the Biblical and contemporary sense of the metaphor to make it apply to the benevolent task of the Christian ministry not incompatible with the pastoral task of tending sheep (Smith 1959, 202). As a result of this narrative alteration of what may have been a specifically apocalyptic component of Jesus’ own beliefs, “some necessary eschatological aspect of Christ’s ministry has been lost from our conception of it” (Smith 1959, 202).
Fish may function in several ways in *The Road*. McCarthy might utilize fish imagery to allude to the larger corpus of American literature in which a “redemptive association plays out in the act of fishing, by which a character communicates with Nature through the natural sign of the fish” (Schaub 2009, 156). He may utilize fish because they once signified to believers a promise of resurrection, of literal life after death. Or he may include fish to allude to the gospel accounts of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus’ call for his disciples to act as fishers of men. Within these biblical references a reader will find specific metaphorical significance that has been lost or transmuted over two millennia. At the juncture of these allusions, then, a broader metaphor seems to emerge in which God’s existence depends on a human being’s ability to see and symbolize evidence of this existence through the signs of the natural world; the father appears to recognize as much when he refers to “the sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (McCarthy 2006, 89). A symbol that has meaning only within the father’s memory will perish when he does.

As a work of post-apocalyptic fiction, *The Road* unsurprisingly utilizes allusions to biblical apocalyptic literature. The beasts and fire of *The Road* recall the beasts and fire of Revelation while McCarthy’s emphasis on fish imagery may function as a reference to the apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ ministry. These same images invite broader biblical interpretations, as well, and lead a reader toward multiple thematic implications. It seems reasonable to assert, however, that modern works of post-apocalyptic fiction utilize the themes, images, and symbolism of biblical and apocalyptic literature to present
similar warnings, similar promises, and similar appeals to steadfast faith. With The Road, McCarthy might warn humanity that it stands to lose God if it loses nature. He may promise that human goodness can persist “in the face of apparent meaninglessness and of the violence loosed by the struggle for survival” (Schaub 2009, 158). And he could be appealing to his readers—in much the same way as the father pleads to his son—to carry the fire onward. Despite the compatibility of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction and biblical apocalyptic literature, however, the question remains why post-apocalyptic fiction resonates so thoroughly with modern audiences. A consideration of The Road within its early twenty-first century setting may reveal that the genre provides comfort primarily for its ability to represent in written form otherwise-incomprehensible ends.
Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* was released on September 26, 2006, almost exactly five years after the perpetration of the most destructive terrorist attack on the United States of America in its relatively brief history. The events of 9/11 cast a kind of shadow over the novel, which is set so specifically in a burned-over and devastated America. McCarthy’s vivid descriptions of ash-filled forests and burned-out cities prompt readers to look not only backward toward the destruction of the World Trade Center but also forward into a fictional world in which similar devastation has been unleashed upon the entire United States. In a sense, this is the truest aim of apocalyptic literature: to understand the circumstances of the present through a fictional representation of the future. In a period of such obvious crisis, Americans sought answers through myriad resources: political briefings, military intelligence, world history, religion, conspiracy theory, et cetera. Rosen argues, however, that “the traditional apocalyptic template has an advantage over more recently favored sense-making paradigms like conspiracy theory and chaos theory in that it encompasses a moral dimension” (Rosen 2008, xiii). It may be that McCarthy’s *The Road*–and the science-fictional subgenre of post-apocalyptic fiction in general–was so well situated for broad appeal because it utilizes this “organizing structure that can create a moral and physical order while also holding out the possibility of social criticism that might lead to a reorientation of a bewildering historical moment” (Rosen 2008, xiii). Perhaps more importantly, however, McCarthy’s novel allows its readers to experience and
comprehend the end-times simply through the power of images and the written word. Through *The Road*'s consideration of time and writing, McCarthy situates turn-of-the-century America within its apocalyptic past and undetermined future and perhaps contemplates the nature of his own end-time, as well.

Time often seems as lost and unrecoverable in the world of *The Road* as the world itself. The novel’s primary characters, after all, have either lost track of time or simply have no concept of it. The father describes days that “sloughed past uncounted and uncalendared” (McCarthy 2006, 273). Early in the novel, as he prepares to move south with his son toward what he hopes will be a warmer climate, he guesses that “the month was October but he wasn’t sure [because] he hadn’t kept a calendar for years” (McCarthy 2006, 4). The boy, on the other hand, has grown up in the destroyed world; he has no memory of—or requirement for—an existence measured by hours, minutes, and seconds. The father remembers life in such a measured world and comprehends that “ever is a long time” (McCarthy 2006, 28). For his son, though, “ever is no time at all” (McCarthy 2006, 28). It seems as though time only exists—and is only required—in a world where the end is an unrealized possibility. In a sense, a reader is able to regard time simultaneously both as the father does—as a scientific measurement of the physical universe—and as his son simply does not. From his or her vantage point in the present, a reader is able to experience an existence beyond the end. The timelessness of the boy’s post-apocalyptic world, in other words, seems to exist in the reader’s time-measured world, as well. Here again the aims of post-apocalyptic fiction coincide with the aim of biblical apocalyptic
literature, “which reveals the end—not of the world, so much, as of the story” (Kreuziger 1986, 8). In this way, readers may turn to post-apocalyptic fiction at least in part for its ability to transport a representation of the end to the present. And in fact, literary scholar Frank Kermode argues that this is the larger aim of literature in general.

Kermode has argued that “we use fictions to enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure” of the world in which we live (Kermode 2000, 45). For any human who is alive and conscious of his or her existence, “the End is a fact of life and a fact of the imagination, working out from the middle, the human crisis” (Kermode 2000, 58). The plot of a novel, then, represents “an organization that humanizes time by giving it form” (Kermode 2000, 45). Post-apocalyptic fiction in particular allows us to “project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (Kermode 2000, 8). Even after the world of *The Road* has ended, however, it seems unclear that this structure becomes more apparent. After all, the father believes he witnesses an “absolute truth of the world” that consists of “darkness implacable [and] . . . the crushing black vacuum of the universe” (McCarthy 2006, 130). Yet later, he hopes that “in the world’s destruction it would be possible at least to see how it was made” (McCarthy 2006, 274). Despite his earlier contention that he has seen the “cold relentless circling of the intestate earth” (McCarthy 2006, 130), he still desires to understand his own existence in terms of the world’s beginning and its end. This desire itself is apocalyptic. Just as biblical apocalyptic literature allowed ancient Hebrew writers to
situate their national and religious concerns within a specific historical setting, modern post-apocalyptic fiction allows its creators to elucidate immediately bewildering circumstances within their broader, historical settings. In other words, apocalyptic literature “depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain ‘in the middest’” (Kermode 2000, 8). This holds true for *The Road*, which was written by a quintessentially American author and published in a country founded on apocalyptic beliefs.

There is no doubt that the nation that would come to be known as the United States of America was settled under apocalyptic circumstances by pioneers with startlingly apocalyptic mindsets. Christopher Columbus wrote about his belief that “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it” (Berger 1999, 133). The Puritans who arrived on the Mayflower “were inspired by the belief that aboriginal America was a place to conquer and colonize for God” (Pearson 2006, 191). And the names of the earliest American settlements further reveal the apocalyptic nature of the nation’s beginnings; Ketterer asserts that “it was hoped that such locations as New York, New England, and New Hampshire might be new in the ideal sense of the New Jerusalem” of the book of Revelation (Ketterer 1974, 27). It seems clear that “America’s sense of itself as a unique nation with a unique role to play in divine history was there from the very outset” (Pearson 2006, 191). But the American apocalypse was importantly dualistic; the colonization of the North America demonstrated that the “break
from Europe had been successfully achieved [but] . . . an apocalyptic struggle with
native, or natural, powers was still to come” (Berger 1999, 133). The earliest Americans
perceived themselves to be “God’s elect, commissioned to bring about the end of the
world through building a millennial kingdom worthy of Christ on American soil”
(Pearson 2006, 193). This belief that “Christ’s millennial kingdom . . . would be
gradually and systematically introduced through their human efforts in harmony with
God’s plan” could be seen embodied in the westward expansion, the exploitation of the
North American environment, and the slaughter of the continent’s native population
(Pearson 2006, 193).

McCarthy alludes to this variety of frontier morality throughout his fiction, often
with the effective use of borders. McCarthy set the action of his earliest novels in
specifically Appalachian territory, after all, and then moved on to the Southeast for his
novels *All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain.* *Blood Meridian,*
perhaps McCarthy’s most famous novel, itself represents “a kind of fulcrum, a borderland
between the early quartet of Tennessee novels written in the 1960s and 1970s . . . and the
Border Trilogy that brought him fame” (Chabon 2007). McCarthy’s attention to borders
is particularly important because of the connotations readers draw from these settings. In
American literature, “civilization is associated with the East, with the past and Europe,
with society–its institutions, laws, its demands for compromise and restriction, its cultural
refinement and emphasis on manners, its industrial development, and its class
distinctions” (Busby 2000, 227). The American West, conversely, represents a
wilderness “where single individuals can test themselves against nature without the
demands for social responsibility and compromise and inherent in being part of a
community” (Busby 2000, 229). Busby asserts that in McCarthy’s fiction, the border
reveals “a line between such opposing forces as civilization/wilderness,
individual/community, fate/free will, past/present, [and] aggression/passivity” (Busby
2000, 229). But the border can’t truly function as a metaphor within the world of The
Road; the father and his son wander a world in which counties and states no longer exist
and the lines on maps carry survivalist rather than patriotic significance. Even the
vaguely southeasterly route the father charts seems to be an inversion of the westward
direction of American manifest destiny and McCarthy’s own previous novels. The
world’s collapse is effectively reinforced through the cessation of one of McCarthy’s
most identifiable literary conceits. A similar contention could be made for the nature of
his typical protagonist.

Literary critic Brian Evensen has gone so far as to delineate McCarthy’s
protagonists–all of whom can be considered itinerant in some fashion–in terms of their
proximity to civilization; he argues that McCarthy’s lead characters are either spirited
unfortunates, nomads, or tramps who remain “in near proximity to the structures and
strictures of society, both literally and metaphorically” (Evensen 1995, 42). His spirited
unfortunates “struggle against the world to escape fortune’s woes, and often are able to
move back into society” (Evensen 1995, 41). His nomads, on the other hand, attempt to
exist on the outside of civilization and “remain outside of hierarchy” that is naturally
imposed by societal structures (Evensen 1995, 42). Here again, *The Road* seems to defy interpretation in the sense that the father and son can’t be categorized in terms of their relation to a civilization that has already been completely and utterly destroyed. They are certainly tramps in the sense that they retain “a sort of moral code with some correspondence to the codes of the society” (Evensen 1995, 41), yet that society no longer exists. They can be considered spirited unfortunates in that they “struggle against the world to escape fortune’s woes” (Evensen 1995, 41), but they are unable to move back into society in the way that Evensen has previously outlined. They are similar to the nomad, whose “existence is a series of movements which explore the limitless open possibilities of the smooth space” outside recognized civilization (Evensen 1995, 42). Yet this definition could be applied just as easily to any character in *The Road*; the entire world might be considered a terrifyingly amoral smooth space. Just as he removed the borders that were so important to his earlier novels, McCarthy has removed society and destroyed an interpretive structure for his entire bibliography. The breakdown inherent in the world’s ending is, in a sense, reflected in the structure of *The Road* itself. In addition to fashioning his writing to create these intertextual apocalypses, McCarthy also draws attention to the inefficacy of the written word in his post-apocalyptic setting.

Scholar James Berger argues that a kind of “post-apocalyptic representational impasse” exists because “if apocalypse in its most radical form were to actually occur, we would have no way to recognize it, much less to record it” (Berger 1999, 13). McCarthy’s protagonist seems to struggle with this very concept in one of the most
complicated portions of narrative in *The Road*. The father steps out into the road and perceives “a sound without cognate and so without description” somewhere beneath his feet (McCarthy 2006, 241). He reviews the destruction around him in general and then describes more specifically his location “at a crossroads a ground set with dolmen stones where the spoken bones of oracles lay moldering” (McCarthy 2006, 241). He asks:

> What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack? At some reckonable and entabled moment? He is coming to steal my eyes. To seal my mouth with dirt. (McCarthy 2006, 241)

McCarthy’s comparison of the rumbling felt by the father to a sound without cognate introduces a specifically linguistic reference into the paragraph. This reference is immediately reinforced by the father’s identification of dolmens, a kind of megalithic tomb whose name is rooted etymologically in an ancient Celtic phrase meaning stone table. That these stone tables house the moldering bones of oracles produces a kind of threefold meaning; the dolmen is a literal grave, a metaphorical resting place for intermediation between humanity and God, and a symbolic table at which no more writing seems likely to take place. The father himself insinuates as much when he asks incredulously if his story will be remembered as though “he sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack” (McCarthy 2006, 241). It isn’t entirely clear to whom the father is directing his questions; he may be talking to himself, to God, or perhaps even to his creator: Cormac McCarthy himself. It is clearer, however, that it will be death that comes to “steal [his] eyes” and “seal [his] mouth with dirt” (McCarthy 2006, 241). Death will remove his capacity for observation and the
ability to represent those observations with words or symbols. In a single paragraph—with
a single word, nearly—McCarthy has fully established a world in which symbolic
representation is decaying rapidly toward complete insignificance. This insignificance
can also be seen in the stories the father tells his son along their post-apocalyptic journey.

Early in The Road, the son asks his father to read him a story. Though it is
uncertain what the father might actually be reading—he carries tarpaulin, food, and lamp
oil in his sack, after all, not storybooks—a reader senses that his tales have become
commonplace for the boy. Later, however, the father mentions that they “don’t work on
[the boy’s] lessons any more” (McCarthy 2006, 245). The son claims to know the
alphabet but refrains from “writing a letter to the good guys” in the sand out of fear that
the bad guys will find it, instead (McCarthy 2006, 245). And eventually, the son no
longer wants to hear his father’s stories because he simply believes them to be untrue.

Despite the father’s protestation that stories “don’t have to be true [because] they’re
stories” (McCarthy 2006, 268), the boy recognizes that the tales he has been told are
ultimately meaningless. He despairs that within the father’s stories “we’re always
helping people and we don’t help people” (McCarthy 2006, 268). The fact that “the
stories affront the boy’s naïve expectation that art have an objective basis in a
correspondence to reality” suggests that his own reality—the destroyed and ashen earth—
will shape any stories he has to tell (Schaub 2008, 164). When the father asks his son to
tell a story, for example, he seems unable to do so beyond admitting that his own dreams
and his own stories are “more like real life” (McCarthy 2006, 268). Resultantly, it seems
clear that “from the boy’s perspective the impact of the world’s disappearance would include the disappearance of narrative, of storytelling itself” (Schaub 2008, 165). In fact, this idea has been introduced earlier in the novel through the father’s invention of games to play with his son. Though the father “tried to remember the rules of childhood games . . . he was sure he had them mostly wrong and he made up new games and gave them made up names [such as] Abnormal Fescue or Catbarf” (McCarthy 2006, 53). Old rules, old stories, and old truths are no longer applicable in this post-apocalyptic world. Even McCarthy’s use of the word fescue in this circumstance seems significant: fescue is defined not only as a type of grass cultivated for pastures or lawns but also as a stick used by a teacher to direct a student’s attention to the letters of the alphabet. Children’s games, grass, learning the alphabet, and meaning have vanished as thoroughly from the destroyed world as the themes of the father’s stories.

Still, it seems clear that “storytelling constitutes one of the devices available to the father for raising his child to become a man and as such concerns the passing on of values from one generation to another” (Schaub 2008, 164). Despite the boy’s objection that his father’s stories are not true, after all, he still talks to his father after his father has died. He still obeys his father’s request by trying “to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget” (McCarthy 2006, 286). And the mother of the family who finds the boy promises him that “the breath of God was his breath though it pass from man to man through all of time” (McCarthy 2006, 286). Here again, it seems that hope for life’s continuance—and a continuance of the father’s
morality, of goodness, and even of God–exists within the boy. He himself nearly seems to acknowledge as much when his father tells him that he is “not the one who has to worry about everything” and he responds “yes I am . . . I am the one” (McCarthy 2006, 286, 259). Schaub argues that “the boy’s assertion may simply indicate that he has matured enough to be the one who has to think of everything, to be troubled by everything, and to grasp that he will likely survive his father” (Schaub 2008, 162). Yet the father himself has said of the boy that if “he is not the word of God God never spoke” (McCarthy 2006, 5). He has asked Eli what he would think if he told him his son was a god. Because of these earlier references, “a reader at least entertains the implication of the analogy, i.e. that the boy is in some sense a receptacle for any number of related ideas, including the consecrated elements of the Eucharist and the body of God” (Schaub 2008, 163). No answer must be unequivocally determined; the “two meanings–the secular and the sacred–co-exist within the text, for the words ‘I am the one’ signify both for the reader” (Schaub 2008, 162).

Finally, it seems most important that the father’s utilization of storytelling enables the perpetuation of his morality through the character of the son. And this may be the thematic component of The Road that seems most personally relevant to its creator. The author dedicates the novel to his son, John Francis McCarthy, who was born when Cormac McCarthy was in his late sixties. In this sense, The Road might represent “a testament to the abyss of a parent’s greatest fears” (Chabon 2007). McCarthy may feel as strongly as his paternal protagonist “the fear of leaving your child alone, of dying before
your child has reached adulthood and learned to work the mechanisms and face the
dangers of the world, or found a new partner to face them with” (Chabon 2007). Even
the post-apocalyptic setting of the novel suggests “the fear of knowing—as every parent
fears—that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more
abased and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited”
(Chabon 2007). The father as protagonist of The Road will live on through the stories he
has told and through the life of his son; Cormac McCarthy seems to hope for a similar
fate. It seems vitally important, however, that the content of the stories told in The Road
is never revealed. The boy eventually considers their moral simplicity dishonest in
comparison to the amorality he witnesses all around him, but the extent of a reader’s
knowledge of the tales ends there. Storytelling seems to have been vitally important to
the shaping of the boy’s morality, yet the act of storytelling is all but excluded from the
novel’s narrative. A reader consequently imagines and inserts his or her own
contemporary tales of heroism and desirable human morality; the father might be telling
stories about knights, superheroes, samurai, or about firemen rushing into collapsing
skyscrapers. Storytelling within the fictional world of The Road enables the perpetuation
of human morality, certainly, but it also prompts readers in the real world to remember
that we also turn to stories to understand human existence. This may be one of the most
significant reasons that post-apocalyptic fiction appeals so thoroughly to modern
audiences; fictional presentations of the end of the world represent future histories, and
“future history is similar to past history: the story a people tells to make sense of the unfolding of events” (Kreuziger 1968, 8).

American history has been unfolding for less than four hundred years, yet Americans have anticipated ends almost since the country’s beginning. Those settlers who expanded America’s borders westward considered themselves “God’s chosen people and their destiny was to win back the vast expanses of western wilderness for Him” (Pearson 2006, 205). In the period of American history “between 1815 and the Civil War, a high-octane blend of millennial fervor and patriotic enthusiasm fueled a wave of reform effort in the new nation” (Boyer 2003, 519). The intent of these “middle-class Americans imbued with the spirit of evangelical Christianity [was] . . . to build on American soil a society worthy of the exalted vision of the New Jerusalem found in the book of Revelation” (Boyer 2003, 519). And less than two centuries ago, an apocalyptic movement began “with the preaching of William Miller, an earnest, self-taught Baptist biblical scholar and itinerant evangelist from the ‘burned over’ district of western New York” (Boyer 2003, 519). What would come to be known as the Millerite movement evolved from Miller’s personal interpretation of the biblical book of Daniel, “particularly Dan. 8:14, which states ‘unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed’” (Boyer 2003, 520). Miller himself “concluded that Jesus Christ would return ‘about the year 1843’ [although] . . . other Millerite exegetes elaborated the master’s calculations to fix upon a precise date for the end: October 22, 1844” (Boyer 2003, 520). Of course, the “Millerite movement collapsed overnight when the eagerly
awaited day came and went” (Boyer 2003, 520). Recent apocalyptic prognostication such as Miller’s might seem easily dismissible—laughable, almost—from a more modern vantage. Yet out of the Millerite movement there eventually “emerged a new Protestant evangelical denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church” (Boyer 2003, 519), which currently counts over sixteen million worshippers among its members. Apocalyptic beliefs in twenty-first century America might be said to be stronger than ever.

Perhaps we have good reason; the twentieth century undoubtedly provided American citizens ample opportunity for apocalyptic speculation. The First World War “and America’s entry into the conflict in 1917 provided a major stimulus to” an apocalyptic cultural mindset (Boyer 2003, 528). Within another fifteen years “many Americans came to regard their economic destitution as divine chastisement for all the hedonism and consumerism of the Jazz Age” (Pearson 2006, 226). And “the rise of the fascist dictators Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolph Hitler in Germany stimulated popular interest in apocalyptic speculation, as some prophecy expositors identified these feared tyrants as forerunners of the Antichrist” (Boyer 2003, 533). It seems easier to ridicule William Miller for interpreting biblical prophecy to predict the end, somehow, than to chastise those who noted “that if the letter A is given the value 100, B 101, C 102, and so on, the name HITLER adds up to 666, the number of the Beast as recorded in Rev. 13:18” (Boyer 2003, 533). World War II is the sort of apocalypse that exists within the national cultural memory, after all. Within our own “age the Holocaust and the use of atomic weapons against Japan have assumed apocalyptic significance [because] . . . they
function as definitive historical divides, as ruptures, pivots, fulcrums separating what
came before from what came after” (Berger 1999, 5). These miniature apocalyptic
“events clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (Berger
1999, 5). This is why Berger suggests that “apocalypse and trauma are congruent ideas,
for both refer to shatterings of existing structures of identity and language, and both
effect their own erasures from memory and must be reconstructed by means of their
traces, remains, survivors, and ghosts; their symptoms” (Berger 1999, 19).

Since the conclusion of World War II, the desire for this variety of apocalyptic
cultural shattering seems only to have intensified. The Reverend Billy Graham pursued
the same kind of date-setting that William Miller had in the nineteenth century,
proclaiming in 1950 to a revival crusade audience that “we may have another year,
maybe two years to work for Jesus Christ, and [then] ladies and gentlemen, I believe it is
all going to be over . . . two years, and it’s all going to be over” (Boyer 2003, 534).
Ronald Reagan was well known for his interest in biblical apocalyptic literature and
stated in 1971 that “for the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of
Armageddon and the second coming of Christ” (Berger 1999, 135). He would maintain
these apocalyptic beliefs throughout his presidency, and for a period of time “journalistic
attention focused particularly (and understandably) on whether Reagan’s view of the
Battle of Armageddon might make him more likely to launch a nuclear war against the
Soviet Union” (Boyer 2003, 537). Within the last few decades “the threat of global
pandemic has become a reality, first with the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has so far killed

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an estimated twenty-two million people, infected another 420 million, and will, it is estimated, see another 50 to 75 million people infected by the year 2010” (Rosen 2008, xix). In the 1990s, “public awareness of fundamentalist prophecy belief in American culture sharpened . . . when a number of tightly knit right-wing groups, inspired at least in part by their apocalyptic beliefs, denounced the federal government as evil, denied its legitimacy, and withdrew into separatist, heavily armed enclaves” (Boyer 2003, 537). And of course, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 represent perhaps the most significant apocalyptic moment in American history since the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A poll taken in 2002 revealed that “59 percent of Americans believe that the events prophesied in the Book of Revelation will occur in the future” (Pearson 2006, 3). It might easily be argued, therefore, that “for many Americans, there is no contradiction between pursuing happiness on earth and looking forward happily to earth’s imminent destruction” (Pearson 2006, 3).

It seems true, to an extent, that we “readily embrace catastrophe in order to attain a new state of wholeness” (Pearson 2006, 6). Readers recognize that post-apocalyptic fiction and its “radical images of Apocalypse—deluges and great balls of fire—are not literal prophecies but metaphors for a destructive and transformative process that will bring psychic health” (Pearson 2006, 6). Elizabeth Rosen argues, however, that a new variant of post-apocalyptic fiction has emerged that entirely excludes this promise of transformation. Recent post-apocalyptic fiction—including Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*—“retains some of the elements of the traditional story, but it often leaves out
elements of New Jerusalem, the divine kingdom that is the reward for the faithful” (Rosen 2008, xiv). The result of such neo-apocalyptic literature, as Rosen calls it, is that “a story which once was grounded in hope about the future has become instead a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe” (Rosen 2008, xiv).

Ultimately, the modern American apocalyptic mindset may not be exceptionally different from that of early American settlers or even ancient Jewish authors of prophecy and apocalyptic literature. It seems true that “like every age, we believe that our own is uniquely decadent and therefore ripe for apocalyptic destruction” (Pearson 2006, 9). Works of post-apocalyptic fiction such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* allow us to situate our own fears within their cultural and historical circumstances. Because it is within storytelling’s power to accomplish such a feat—and storytelling itself seems to be at stake within the world of *The Road*—it becomes vitally important that the son equates the stories he has to tell with dreams—with the “stories inside” that he is afraid to reveal (McCarthy 2006, 268). We have learned about one of his dreams, after all, a dream in which he “had this penguin and you wound it up and it would waddle and flap its flippers” (McCarthy 2006, 36). The boy wakes up terrified at the thought that the penguin in his dream “came around the corner but nobody had wound it up” (McCarthy 2006, 36). We live in a world where we can turn to storytelling—to works of fictional representation—to understand our place in the world. Without storytelling, we stand to
lose our beliefs, our morality, and our theology; we stand even to lose the existence of God. Without storytelling, we would live in a world such as the boy’s, where the “winder wasn’t turning” (McCarthy 2006, 37).
REFERENCE LIST


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