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MEMORY AND DREAM AS NARRATIVE MOTIFS IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S THE ROAD

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Abstract: This article examines memory and dream as recurrent narrative motifs in Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel The Road (2006) and explores their role in constructing the existential hero. Drawing on the theory of the motif developed by A. N. Veselovsky and B. Tomashevsky and on existentialist thought (Camus, Jaspers), I argue that both motifs are profoundly ambivalent. Memory is the only surviving archive of the destroyed world; at the same time, it becomes a burden that pulls the protagonist away from the present. Pleasant dreams act as seductive invitations to surrender, whereas nightmares warn and prepare. Read in this light, the father's deliberate refusal of consoling memories and dreams emerges as the inner dimension of his existential choice. The recurring cave dream, which opens the novel and returns at the father's death, forms a compositional ring through which the symbolic light passes from father to son. The findings show that in The Road memory and dream are not decorative elements but structural components of the hero concept.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, The Road, motif, memory, dream, existential hero, post-apocalyptic novel, nostalgia, composition, American literature.

Introduction

Few twenty-first-century novels have shaped American post-apocalyptic fiction as decisively as Cormac McCarthy's The Road (2006), which received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007. Its plot is deliberately sparse: years after an unexplained catastrophe, an unnamed father and his son walk south through a burned America towards the sea. Around this minimal story a substantial body of criticism has grown, concentrating on the novel's ethics and religious imagery [14, p. 1; 3, p. 222], on its movement from the self towards the other [11, p. 117] and on naming in a world that is losing its referents [5, p. 59].

Within this criticism, memory and dream have usually been treated as symptoms of the hero's condition. Laguarta Bueno reads the father's recurring dreams as traumatic acting out [7, pp. 79–81], while O'Connor shows that he tries to preserve the past through lists and litanies even as the novel denies the existence of any golden age [9, pp. 7, 9]. Valuable as these readings are, they leave one paradox unexplained. Almost everything the reader learns about the lost world arrives through memories and dreams, and yet the father himself repeatedly treats them as dangers. In my view, this paradox can be resolved only if memory and dream are approached as recurring motifs with stable

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narrative and compositional functions, a perspective that has not yet been applied to the novel systematically.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to identify the functions of the memory and dream motifs in The Road and to show how they shape the concept of the existential hero. Three questions guide the analysis: what forms these motifs take, what narrative and compositional work they perform, and how the protagonist's attitude towards them reflects his existential choice.

Methods

To answer these questions, the study combines motif analysis with an existentialist reading of character. Its starting point is the tradition of historical poetics: Veselovsky defined the motif as the smallest indivisible unit of narrative [13, pp. 300–305], and Tomashevsky later distinguished bound motifs, which cannot be removed without breaking the plot, from free motifs, which may be omitted but enrich the meaning of a work [12, pp. 182–183]. Following these definitions, an image or situation is treated here as a motif only when it recurs and preserves a stable semantic core.

The existentialist part of the framework relies on two concepts. Jaspers's limit situation describes an inescapable situation, such as death, suffering, struggle or guilt, in which the antinomic structure of existence is exposed and a person must act without any guarantee [4, p. 220], whereas Camus's philosophy of the absurd begins with the question of whether life is worth living at all [2, p. 4]. To interpret the father's relation to the past, the study also draws on Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia [1, p. 41] and on Ricoeur's reflections on memory and forgetting [10, p. xv].

The material comprises all episodes of the novel in which recollection or dreaming is explicitly marked. Having been identified through close reading, these episodes were grouped by function and interpreted with descriptive, comparative and hermeneutic methods. Quotations follow the Picador electronic edition [8], and page numbers refer to the pages of its PDF file.

Results

Memory as archive and as burden

Close reading reveals that memory in The Road performs four interrelated functions, each of which bears directly on the construction of the hero.

Memory as the archive of the lost world. Because no other record has survived, the father's recollections are the only testimony to what the world once was. He remembers an autumn day on a lake with his uncle, a boat, birch trees and evening lights on the shore, and he calls it the perfect day of his childhood [8, p. 16]. I would argue that the word perfect is decisive here: the memory is valued not for any event it contains but for its wholeness, which the fragmented present can no longer offer. Equally vivid are his recollections of sitting in a theatre with his wife [8, p. 19] and of standing with his own father at a mountain gap, the very place to which he now returns with his son [8, p. 27]. Rendered in colour, sound and touch, these scenes stand against a present reduced to grey ash. Such a contrast amounts to the novel's basic aesthetic principle: the fuller the remembered world, the emptier the present appears.

Memory as a dangerous burden. Yet the same richness turns memory into a threat. The father warns the boy that the things you put into your head are there forever [8, p. 16]. From my perspective,

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this warning reverses the usual hierarchy of remembering and forgetting: in a ruined world, what one refuses to see matters as much as what one preserves. Memory thus becomes not a refuge but a store of images that can wound, and the novel, as O'Connor notes, denies the possibility of recovering any golden age [9, p. 9]. The clearest gesture of resistance comes when the father leaves his wife's photograph lying on the road [8, p. 37]. In Boym's terms [1, p. 41], he refuses restorative nostalgia, the wish to rebuild the lost home, since such nostalgia would bind him to a world that cannot return.

The broken transmission of memory. A further function emerges in the relationship between generations. Born after the catastrophe, the boy has no memories of the old world at all. In the bunker the father realises that to the child he is himself an alien, a being from a planet that no longer exists, and that he cannot construct the lost world for the boy without constructing its loss as well [8, p. 97]. This moment, it seems to me, is one of the most painful in the novel, for it shows that even the father's love cannot carry the past across the generational divide. Memory, which normally binds generations, here marks the gap between them.

The erosion of language. The last function concerns language itself. The narrator observes that the names of things are slowly following those things into oblivion: colours, the names of birds, things to eat and finally the names of what one believed to be true [8, p. 59]. Kunsa reads this loss of names as part of the novel's struggle to remake language after the end [5, p. 59]. The order of the list is telling, since it moves from the visible world to the world of belief; to forget a word, the passage implies, is to lose a piece of reality.

Dream as temptation and as warning

If memory looks backwards, the dream motif oscillates between consolation and alarm, and it is organised around these two poles.

Pleasant dreams as temptation. On this point the father's rule is explicit: the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril, and everything else is the call of languor and of death [8, p. 19]. In my view, this sentence is the key to the whole dream motif, because it turns dreaming from a passive experience into an object of moral choice. Consistently with it, he learns to wake himself from siren worlds of flowering woods and blue sky [8, p. 19] and passes the rule on to his son: should the boy become happy again in dreams of a world that never was or never will be, he will have given up [8, p. 118]. The mother, by contrast, says that she does not dream at all [8, p. 41]. Her dreamlessness, significantly, accompanies her loss of the will to live.

Nightmares as warning. Nightmares, on the other hand, are never resisted. The novel opens with a dream in which the boy leads his father through a cave towards a pale, blind creature rising from a black lake [8, p. 11]. Later the father dreams of the child laid out dead and stays awake for fear the dream will return [8, p. 82]; in the bunker silent creatures seem to warn him that he cannot kindle in the child's heart what is ashes in his own [8, p. 97]. Laguarta Bueno reads such recurring dreams as traumatic acting out in LaCapra's sense [7, pp. 79–81; 6, pp. 21–22]. Without rejecting this interpretation, I would add that these dreams also rehearse the limit situation [4, p. 220] that the waking hero must face: rather than paralysing him, they prepare him for action.

The compositional ring. Most revealing of all is the return of the cave dream as the father is dying. This time the boy carries a candle, and the two have reached a point of no return measured only

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by the light they carry with them [8, p. 171]. What was a frightening image at the beginning becomes, at the end, an image of succession: the light now belongs to the son. Through this ring the dream motif merges with the leitmotif of carrying the fire [8, pp. 82, 170] and marks the transfer of meaning from one generation to the next.

Discussion

Taken together, the results suggest that memory and dream in The Road are bound motifs in Tomashevsky's sense [12, p. 183]. Remove them, and the text would lose both its only representation of the lost world and its main compositional frame. Both motifs, moreover, are ambivalent, preserving what has disappeared while drawing the hero away from the present road.

It is precisely this ambivalence that links the motifs to the novel's existential problematics. Whereas the mother yields to the past and to nothingness, the father refuses consoling memories and dreams and remains beside the child. His choice therefore has an inner as well as an outer dimension: he resists not only cannibals and thieves but also the seductions of his own mind. Here my reading departs from trauma-oriented interpretations, which present the father as subject to his dreams [7, pp. 79–81]; the motif analysis shows him, on the contrary, governing them. To Camus's fundamental question of whether life is worth living [2, p. 4], he thus answers in the affirmative, keeping the absurd in view rather than escaping it.

The ending confirms this reading. The boy promises to talk to his dead father every day and not to forget [8, p. 174], after which the final paragraph evokes brook trout that once lived in mountain streams [8, p. 175]. Memory, once the father's private burden, thus becomes the son's inheritance, while the closing image turns into a collective elegy for a world that cannot be restored. Ricoeur's idea of a just memory [10, p. xv], one that neither erases the past nor is imprisoned by it, aptly describes this final balance.

Conclusion

To conclude, memory and dream in The Road are structural components of the hero concept rather than ornaments. Memory serves as the archive of the lost world and, at the same time, as a burden that the hero must partly renounce; pleasant dreams tempt him to surrender, whereas nightmares warn and prepare. The father's conscious refusal of consolation forms, as I have argued, the inner layer of his existential choice, and the cave dream, framing the novel from its first page to the father's death, transfers the symbolic light to the son. It follows that the existential hero of twenty-first-century American post-apocalyptic fiction is defined not only by his actions in the outer world but also by the way he governs his relation to the past. A comparative study of these motifs in Colson Whitehead's Zone One and Peter Heller's The Dog Stars would be a natural continuation of this research.

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