

“THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT”: LOSING AND FINDING
IMMORTALITY IN A POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommended that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

Jean Griffith, Committee Chair

Peter Zoller, Committee Member

Jeffery Hershfield, Committee Member

DEDICATION

To my mother—my biggest cheerleader, and my son—my inspiration for everything.
She started this journey with me, and he finishes the walk at my side

Surely, if Mother Nature had been consulted, she would never have consented to building a city in New Orleans.

~ Mortimer Zuckerman

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between man, nature and immortality through the lens of two novels: *The Children of Men* by P.D. James, and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. The paper looks at the way these two novels approach the end of humanity and how the characters respond to the pending extinction.

In *The Road* a nuclear holocaust wipes everything out, covering the world in ash, and slowly killing humans much the way the dinosaurs died. *The Children of Men* focuses on the singular extinction of the human race alone, through world-wide infertility.

If our immortality has always been assured by our progeny, and the knowledge that we live on through them both biologically and through the art and literature and creations that we leave behind for future generations, what becomes of humanity when there are no future generations? Is the immortality of humans something only achieved within the human race, or is there hope that we can embrace a more holistic sense of our place in the natural order? Is there a type of immortality granted to us simply because we are part of the whole of nature? And if so, is it enough for mankind?

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“THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT”: LOSING AND FINDING IMMORTALITY IN A POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD

In the “life-cycle” of a planet, we humans are such small things and lead such small lives that our individual and collective time on our planet is little more than a geologic blink. And yet for us, the time we have is far more significant than the billions of years the earth has. The disparity in the scale of humans and the planet opens the door for authors of speculative fiction to take a look at futures that are in no way assured, but are not impossible either, futures that may or may not include the human race. We can look back and see evidence of the time when there were no humans on the earth. We can see other species that lived their time—often longer than our own species has been on the planet—and then gone extinct. The long lens through which we view the planet makes it entirely possible to envision a future when the extinct species is our own.

We can imagine total global disaster as Cormac McCarthy does in his novel *The Road*. *The Road* is the bleak record of the aimless journey of a nameless man and his son through a desolate nuclear winter and the loss of everything they knew. They and the small numbers of humans left alive struggle to survive on an earth that has become fully hostile to life and profoundly barren, the last denizens of the planet—a handful of humans, perhaps a hearty dog or so—gasping out the final few painful breaths before death. The likelihood of survival seems slim to none. P.D. James’s *The Children of Men* paints a picture of humanity not declining into extinction, but instead ending with a jarring halt in a single generation due to what is thought to be sudden and total human global infertility. The human species in James’s novel is dying alone, while the rest of life on the planet moves along unconcerned. The common thread between the two texts

is that the finality of the human race is juxtaposed with a single miracle child who represents hope and potential, albeit feeble hope and sickly potential. These miracle children stand in stark contrast to the adult characters of the novels. There is a persistent inability, particularly among the adult protagonists, to see that nature is not an enemy but that humanity is simply part of the whole. There is also a consistent trend of expulsion—people expelling other people, the earth expelling humans. Where the adults fail in that oneness with nature, the children seem to succeed, if only because they do nothing else. The children, the boy in *The Road*, most notably, are at home in their environments and unfettered by a nostalgic past. They seem more equipped to deal with the world around them by the very fact of their being fully present in that world and not living in dreams and haunting memories.

So often, the earth is a thing we anthropomorphize into something we can understand better and relate to more fully. This rolling hunk of stardust and molten elements, upon which life proliferates, but which, on its own, is not a living thing, nevertheless becomes a “she,” a “mother.” We take the land and the oceans and the ecosystems and meld them together into a symbolic single living organism. But earth is not a single living organism. It is a planetary body conducive to the presence of living things. Planets do not live and die like people or like species. They have their own timetables and eras. Destruction within those timelines can take so many different forms, from astounding violence to slow extinction. In *The Road*, the demise of humans and the seeming demise of the planet happen simultaneously. Though tragic and cruel, the end of all life is holistic, and the destruction seems to encompass everything. If we had no understanding of previous global disasters and extinctions, the nuclear winter in

The Road might even look like the very end of everything on earth. At first glance, the world in *The Road* seems the harsher of the two worlds with its endless ashy sea of death and destruction, but *The Children of Men* offers a counter argument in the form of a perfect world, whole and healthy and complete with just one single exception. It gives us a world where humans and humans alone are coming to an end. Butterflies, strawberries, deer, fish, birds, kittens, and everything else on the earth goes along as before. The planet, an entity apart from humans, goes on just fine when the mayfly span of their lives is over. Which destruction is the more brutal? It seems to be a comparison evocative of Robert Frost, a choice between fire and ice. Both scenarios will accomplish the same goal, the end of humanity.

As a “literature of ideas,” the genre of science fiction allows us to play with extreme scenarios, and to take small realities and turn them into larger ones. We are encouraged to ask “what if.” Greg Garrard says of apocalyptic literature: “Apocalypse provides an emotionally charged frame of reference within which complex, long term issues are reduced to mono-causal crises involving conflicts between recognizably opposed groups” (114). He goes on to cite an “us” and “them” quality in apocalyptic literature. But in *The Road* and in *The Children of Men*, while there are multiple instances of “us vs. them,” the primary conflict is between humanity and nature. It is an artificial fight, because only man is fighting in this battle of man against nature. Nature is simply continuing. In *The Children of Men* the continuation is clear and uninterrupted. In *The Road*, the continuation is on a far larger scale—the near annihilation of the planet to be followed, presumably, by re-genesis. The conflict, in large part, comes from man’s inability in these novels to recognize that he is not separate from nature but part of

nature and as such has both the probability of eventual extinction and a place in a greater chain of life and events. Immortality is not only assured by progeny but also by the fact that the world we are part of will continue to exist even when we are no longer part of it. The characters in the novels seem to reach for this ideal, but they manage to fall short, never quite able to find solace in their place in the pattern nor fully embrace a oneness with nature. Without the ability to fight his primary opponent, because nature is not actually part of the fight at all, man fights man. These are lesser battles that sprout up in lieu of the true fight, the fight for survival. How does one fight global infertility when science has failed? How does one fight the holocaust of a nuclear wasteland and the seeming death of all life? If reproduction is natural and our species can no longer do this natural act, and yet can find no cause for the failure, whom do we blame? Can we blame anything or anyone but ourselves? How do we fight a dying planet, one that we probably “killed”, or an enemy that is not an enemy but merely a biological failure? The answer is simple: we can't. So man fights man instead, because the instinct to fight, to press on, to move forward, is so strong that man can do nothing else, even when that forward momentum leads nowhere at all and changes nothing. While man fights man to the death, the planet rotates on its axis and circles the sun, relentlessly, heedless of the violence a handful of tiny creatures inflict on each other. The only two characters who seem fully accepting of the reality of the worlds in which they dwell are the children. They know nothing else. They do not resist or combat the world or hunger for one that is lost to them. They simply exist within the world as it is. The normalcy—particularly for the boy in *The Road*, who is cognizant of his surroundings—that exists for them allows them a closer unity with nature, but also offers a distance from the rest of humanity. The

reader sees this distance in the Omegas, but is never close enough within the novel to know how they relate to nature. For the two child figures, the sense of being cast out, or expelled seems no issue. The newborn baby in *The Children of Men* is unconcerned with the prophetic words of Theo telling his mother how alone he will be. He is concerned with survival, and he eats well. The boy in *The Road* has lived so long with the dead that they are inside his head. The infant and the boy seem to live on a more instinctive, more animal plane. They are less pensive, less reflective, and more active than their adult counterparts. Their actions are not filled with pathos and internal struggle. This quality can put them in danger at times, but it also seems to make them more fit for survival in their respective worlds as those worlds exist in the moment.

Images of nature and life and birth are deeply entwined with the characters and the storyline in *The Children of Men*. Gardens, ponds, woods, seas, the movement of the seasons, all are so keenly experienced by the narrator that they open the door to an exploration of the interaction and interplay between nature and humanity. Within the novel, the places that seem most sheltering and safe are those outside the reach and trappings of humanity, while the most dangerous places are those that should, in theory, be the safest now that crime is at a minimum and the goal of the leaders for the country is pleasure and comfort. Even so, it is towns, cities, and roads that are dangerous now and safety is only found in the encroaching arms of the natural world. It is an uncomfortable symbiosis, the reliance man has on the natural world, and the way that, as the population dwindles, nature presses ever closer. This encroachment of “wild” nature breeds resentment, envy, anger, and fear, while at the same time the beauty and fecundity of nature gives Theo, the protagonist, his only true pleasure.

Over and over again, we see nature interpreted as hostile by the characters. Theo visits a church only to find a young deer standing by the altar “as if this were its natural habitat.” The chaplain chases it out, tossing prayer books at the creature which eventually prances out of the chapel, leaving the clergyman to turn to Theo, “tears streaming down his face. ‘Christ, why can’t they wait? Bloody animals. They’ll have it all soon enough. Why can’t they wait?’” (47). The man’s plea is so plaintive and bleak, as it acknowledges how close he and all the people he loves are to the end of their world. He is fully aware that in such a short time, all the spaces that were important to people will belong, once again, to nature. In a reversal of human cultural evolution, the land, once clearly by humans, is being reclaimed by nature. Theo expresses the same fear and resentment of nature in his journal when he writes, “For all our knowledge, our intelligence, our power, we can no longer do what the animals do without thought. No wonder we both worship and resent them” (13). This thoughtless thing is not sex, it is procreation. Procreation is always something humans want to control in some way or another. As a whole, people do not reproduce thoughtlessly.

That worship of animals is seen particularly in the way cats are treated throughout the novel. Cats, with their history of being both worshiped and feared by mankind, become substitute infants. Theo passes a christening party and two of the women, carrying white bundles wrapped in shawls, hold out two kittens dressed in baby bonnets for him to admire as they make their way to the church. With no babies to baptize, the people perform their ceremonies on pets. Later, Theo recounts in his journal a visit to see his own cat, which now lives with his ex-wife. He writes about animal custody battles and laws that have been put in place to regulate the birth of

“fecund domestic animals” as well as the rituals that have arisen surrounding this little miracle of life. People seek out the infant animals as a substitute for their own lost ability to reproduce, all the while reveling in the details and events of those births in lieu of human births. The rules surrounding the litters of kittens and the adult cats speak of a society highly aware of the capacity for the grieving childless to go to extreme lengths with the desire to find a substitute for the children they do not bear. Theo speaks of bitter and expensive custody battles over pets, echoing the cleric’s cry of “they’ll have it all soon enough.” People are already bequeathing time, money, and devotion that would be lavished on children, to selected animals. Nature provides a substitute for the non-mothers and non-fathers to pour their need to love and cosset and nurture.

After her litter, Mathilda, Theo and his ex-wife’s cat, will be sterilized, or permitted one final litter where all the kittens save one male would be destroyed. There is no stated reason why these laws are in place now, but we know from the text that they are vigorously enforced. The government asserts control over society by channeling the maternal and paternal energies of the population in a controlled and orderly direction, maintaining the guidelines of civilization, and control over the populace, as long as possible. It is another area in which people within the novel draw near to nature in a controlled way. Domestic animals are not bred indiscriminately. Their breeding is carefully monitored and never allowed to run rampant. It is as if the government steps in to control the breeding of pets to prevent the grieving world from overrunning the country with kittens. Perhaps the drive to control the reproduction of these pets has less to do with resources—which are readily becoming abundantly available—and more to do with a human need to be in control. No longer able to have

any control over their own breeding, humans maintain rigid control over the breeding of their pets.

Like kittens, gardens also hold a pride of place for people as they slowly vanish from the planet. Gardens are equated early in the novel with children when Theo describes his wife, Helena's, response to her pregnancy: "Helena, as soon as she knew she was pregnant, had insisted on a house with a garden and a south facing nursery" (39). Theo also takes the time to recall the gardens at Xan's home, Woolcombe, that he recalls from his own childhood. Woolcombe for Theo is the place that truly represents home. It was where he spent his summers and where his mother had eventually gone to die after Omega had killed the hope for the future. Xan, for whom Woolcombe had been a prison, turned the house into a retirement hospice. But for Theo, Woolcombe represents freedom and while Xan would never return, Theo has visions of one day returning to the house of his childhood to die. The strongest memory of that time revolves around a bridge and the historical event of a battle that had taken place there.

To commemorate the event, Theo and Xan toss flowers into the water below and fire pistols in the air. As adults years later, it is that one moment, the requiem with flowers and gunfire, that they recall, and discuss recounting the events to commemorate humanity's time on the planet. They imagine that if they were the last two men on earth, they would "Drink. Salute the darkness and remember the light. Shout out a roll-call of names and then shoot ourselves." Xan reminisces that he would like "the season to be midsummer, the wine to be claret and the place to be the bridge at Woolcombe" (119). Woolcombe is a place that, for the reader, only exists in mid-summer. That was when Theo would go there as a child, so Woolcombe and summer are bound together for the

them. It is a place of manicured gardens and lush fields through which to ride bicycles. Youth means summer for Theo. It is the time of year he thinks of when he looks back on his youth. At the precipice where they stand, the end of their world, Xan and Theo both reach for this youthful time, recognizing it as a place from which to grow and later to die, much as those historical defenders of the bridge died. It seems to assert that failure to become one with the natural world again. Instead of feeling humanity has lived its time and will progress naturally from the world, there is a sense that they are being expelled before their time, when it's still only summer and humanity has not yet reached its own fall or winter. We see the grasping for control again when a natural eventual death is rejected in favor of suicide, in a final (for the victims) attempt to maintain control in the face of chaos.

Later in the novel, the association of children and gardens is reasserted through Julian. Theo sees Julian in the marketplace, and his description of her is so replete with the color and glow of pregnancy that some readers will spot instantly that she is with child, while others will not be able to miss it in hindsight:

She was choosing fruit . . . holding out an open canvas bag with liberality to receive fragile brown bags almost bursting with the golden, pitted globes of oranges, the gleaming curves of bananas, the russet of Cox's Orange Pippins. I saw her in a glow of effulgent colour, skin and hair seeming to absorb the radiance from the fruit, as if she were not lit by the hard glaring lights of the store, but by a warm southern sun. (148)

The passage is “pregnant” with Julian’s pregnancy. Words like “globes”, “curves”, “fragile”, “bursting”, “glow”, “effulgent”, and “radiance” all point out the miracle of life (148). She is buying fruit and seems lit by a southern sun. It is as though she is carrying the garden with her, or has, in essence, become the garden herself. Throughout the novel there are moments when humanity and nature merge with, rather than oppose one another, and this is one of those moments. The primal state of pregnancy, not something that man—or woman, rather--controls, but something that progresses within her to the fruition of new life, seats Julian for the moment in that natural world that humanity works so hard to separate themselves from.

As the time for her delivery draws near, Julian, Theo, and Miriam—friend of Julian and a trained midwife--are on the run and seeking a safe haven for the birth. They press through the woods to a place Theo recalls from his youth and come across a Hawthorne tree, “heavy with red berries. From its top bough there cascaded a white froth of travellers’ joy, delicate as a veil, through which the berries shone like jewels” (241). Bridal imagery is used here--the white veil, blood red berries. It is an amalgamation of the Garden of Eden and the stable in Bethlehem. The nature of the moment alters the perception of the environment in that instant: “It was as if in one moment the forest was transformed from a place of darkness and menace, in which he [Theo] was at heart convinced that one of them would die, into a sanctuary, mysterious and beautiful, uncaring of these three curious interlopers, but a place in which nothing that lived could be wholly alien from him” (241). In this moment, Theo almost finds a place of peace and a space of his own, a part of the natural world. The merging with nature--the idea that by being part of nature, even in death we do not fully die, but

become one with all life because we have always been one with all life—is pushed aside by the insistent pains of labor and the eminent birth of what will be either humanity’s best hope or their final farewell. Nature in this passage is both “sanctuary,” and “uncaring”, shelter and protection but without concern for either. Theo fails, here, to embrace the immersion in nature that would seem to be the only true means of “salvation” for humanity. He reaches for it, then distances himself as they retreat again into the trappings of humanity, relieved to find a rundown cabin in which to seek shelter and abandoning the beautiful glade for the seemingly more reliable safety of the building. It is as though they have the chance to be welcomed back to the Garden of Eden and reject it for the “lone and dreary world” made by human hands.

If gardens are childhood and life in the novel, the trappings of civilization are death and suffering. Roads, cities, homes, beach houses, palaces, city parks, even the manor house at Woolcombe become places of death, pain, and fear. Cultural events now hold death and blood. The safety people expect as they gather closer and closer together is an illusion and nowhere are people more at risk than under the thumb of the government. Theo attends a “quietus”—a group suicide of the elderly, incentivized by the government, to get rid of the aging before they become a burden on society—to see how the affair is handled. The beach huts “which for so many decades had echoed with the laughter of children . . . Silly, happy celebrations of family holidays: Pete’s Place, Ocean View, Spray Cottage, Happy Hut” (85). were being used for the women to change into the white robes they would wear to die. The assisted suicide, or murder in some cases, involves the participants being chained in boats and towed out beyond the

sight of land, before the boats were sunk. Not all the victims are voluntary, sane or sober.

In a world on the edge of demise, everything can seem upside down. The Isle of Man, formerly a holiday spot, idyllic and pastoral, is now a violent penal colony where cannibalism and starvation prevail. Hyde Park, in London, is now a refuge for Flagellants who beat their bare backs bloody in hope that some god will lift the curse that they think is responsible for the mass infertility. The slowly decaying roads are plagued with “painted faces”—troupes of Omegas who roam the roads laying traps for those who would dare drive at night and killing a victim from every car they take before they torch the vehicles. In rapid succession, Theo runs into two old friends who are both in the helpless position of having homes they are slowly losing the ability to care for. One friend directly asks if he can move in with Theo and the other makes a deliberate fuss over his ability to take care of himself. Theo can sense fear behind both the request and the protests of ability, fear of being forced out of their homes, perhaps being forced to participate in the quietus. A trip into a village to find a car proves to be a harrowing and miserable experience for Theo, forcing him into a position where, to acquire the most basic necessities, he must become more a demon himself. He attacks an elderly couple in their home, but in a mirror of the dying populace around him, rather than being something fast and smooth and easy, he has to concern himself with the frailties of the elderly couple and the scarcity that his ransacking provides. He escapes with a pan of water, a few pillows, and blood on his hands when one of his victims is later reported dead. The places that should be refuges for people are dangerous and slowly being

overtaken by nature, and nature, which the characters expect to find threatening, seems to offer the only safety and protection.

With no future to live for, life becomes a matter of spending time. Theo takes note, early in the novel, of how golf has become the national past time. He speaks of acres of land being dug up and “reformed” to create the courses. This act of reforming nature into something “natural” or, rather, “nature-like,” conveys a distressing image. It revisits the concept of expulsion of that which is of value, in this case for something that seems to be more valuable. The sentiment of “leave the planet better than you found it, for succeeding generations” holds no sway. Golf courses are devastating to the environment from which they are developed, destroying the land to make fake hills and valleys. The flora is plowed under to make way for lush green grass. The fauna are discouraged and kept away lest they damage the greens. The greens are kept lush with chemicals and constant care all so they can seem like places to be close to nature, when they are about as far away as one can be without going indoors.

This undermining of the natural order of things is reflected in the national semen and fertility testing. That Julian and Luke were both exempt from testing based on their not being ideal candidates to reestablish the species is another example of the subsuming of nature to approximate something “nature-like”. The golf courses are orderly, beautiful, but in a controlled and unnatural way. It harkens back to the kittens and breeding of fecund domestic animals, allowing for a little contact with nature in a highly controlled manner. Control over their own reproduction is the one area mankind has none and it seems to intensify their need to control everything else. The effect is the

opposite of what is intended, though. The very act of such total control over the centers of culture serves to make them unsafe places to be.

This split, a split in which culture is equated with danger and nature means safety is a major theme in the Cormac McCarthy novel, *The Road*. The boy, who has been on the move in search of safety for his entire life, finds houses and people and the trappings of civilization to be sources of terror and potential death, and time and again his fears are proven valid. Every time they come to a house, the father must coax and cajole and convince the boy to enter because what he has seen in similar houses in the past: cannibals with a living larder in the basement, a ghost town where they are shot at and his father kills a man with a flare, a tanker truck full of dead bodies. The few times they encounter a house or building that might be a sanctuary, they cannot stay long for fear that others will come and to steal, hurt, or kill them.

Despite the dissolution of culture and society, some of the darkest traces of both remain. The fear of other people and of anything that resembles culture or community is borne out in nearly every contact the father and son have with other people. When others approach, the man and the boy hide, seeking the shelter of the dying trees or tall dead grasses and piles of decaying leaves. They lie for hours in these poor hiding spots waiting for anyone who comes near to pass by. They leave the road—a symbol of culture and civilization—for the meager shelter of the husks of nature whenever anyone comes too close to them. But even while they recognize the danger other people represent and the security the dying world offers, the boy longs for human contact. He longs for another child, or even a dog, something or someone with whom he can connect. He fights with his dad over a child and a dog he is positive he has seen. He

defies his father when they run into the old man on the road, insisting they share their meager resources with him. Anthropologically, food sharing is a vital part of what makes up the human community. Biologically, food connects us to nature and each other. McCarthy show the reader in that scene how desperately the boy and even his father long for human connection. The opposite is the case when they catch up with the thief who stole their possessions--the father offers that man no quarter and strips him of even his clothing and shoes. The boy and the reader alike know that this action is a death sentence for the man.

The Road is a world devoid of society. There are tiny pockets of grouped individuals, but they are not societies, but rather packs, and will hold together only as long as such community can aid individual survival. Perhaps all societies in their most basic evaluation are simply packs, but these groups of humans within the novel are far closer to hunting packs of beasts, willing to turn on their own when they fall and devour them as prey. Even within these packs, the pattern still holds that those people most needed to perpetuate survival are low in status (something we see in *The Children of Men* with Julian and Luke being exempt from fertility testing). The pair watches a group pass by and after the army and wagons come the women, "perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant" (McCarthy 41). The women are herded like cattle rather than seen as human or even as objects of desire. If they are pregnant, the reader already knows the baby will not grow to adulthood, and later the image of the infant carcass on a still smoking spit confirms the certain knowledge that those pregnancies do not represent hope.

On their journey, the pair occasionally stumbles upon places where the remnants of civilization offer some protection and some resources. They return to the man's childhood home without danger, and they find a cistern full of water and an orchard with desiccated, but edible, apples¹. The most poignant scene of this kind may be the instance where, in rifling through a supermarket, they find a single can of Coca Cola: “. . . he [the father] put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can . . .”(13). It is as though this can is one of the few remaining flowers of humanity's past and must be savored as such—plucked carefully, handled delicately, the aroma inhaled, and then slowly relished until it is no more. It is a mislaid faith that the man has in the trapping of civilization, perhaps brought on by nostalgia and hope and grief. He, unlike the boy, wants to go into every home or building, partly for survival's sake of course, but also out of a hope that he will be able to find the safety and security that has been lost. They do not have to visit the man's childhood home but they do because of the nostalgic, mourning, and hopeful impulse of the father who is still living in the dead past. They are, presumably, in an area where they could visit any empty home. They go back to that house not for what it holds, but for what it held.

The only consistent safety the man and his son find is the shelter of nature. And yet, even with this fact proven time and time again, they still try to seek refuge and solace within the defunct structures of past civilization. They persistently test their luck

¹ In both novels we see Garden of Eden imagery. These references seem to hint that this destruction is a reversal of Genesis, a return to the garden. Perhaps the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the ability to separate and distance humanity from nature and the remedy is a return to nature so complete that there can be no hint of separation left behind. Apples, gardens, over and over this image confronts the reader and the characters, not as taunts, but more as invitations--embrace nature and find solace in the loss, peace in the longevity, and immortality as a part of the whole.

in houses, towns, gas stations, seeking out the remnants of fields and orchards. Even their journey and the way they refer back to a tattered map of a road to nowhere seems to enforce this hope that the trappings of civilization will provide salvation. The road—man made thoroughfare—is not a shelter or haven. Any time they approach other people, they hurry to hide off the road for safety, and yet it is the road to which they return and to which they cling.

Theo, Miriam, and Julian do the same in *The Children of Men*. While it is nature that offers safety and protection, even when they have it, they seek for even some small amount of civility in the remembered hope that those things once sheltered them and may do so again. Neither group can grasp the idea that nature is not the enemy causing the death of the planet or universal infertility, but that it acts as a shelter despite the effects of something like a nuclear winter and the potential extinction it might cause. There are moments when they almost grasp the concept that they are part of nature and, as such, will live on through nature, but those moments of near-realization are fleeting and never quite take root.

Perhaps the difficulty in taking comfort from belonging to nature lies in the inability to see immortality there. In our culture, we tend to draw our comfort from our children. But the youngest people in James's world are no longer children and there will be no more young people. There is a gulf between this last generation and the older generations. In a world where the youngest person is twenty-five, age becomes a class line. The final generation is tagged with the name "Omega". It is a term both accurate and cruel, setting them apart as unique because they are the end of humanity. This final

generation is feared and revered, idealized and pitied all at once, Theo tells the reader that they have an unnatural beauty about them:

. . . nature in her ultimate unkindness wished to emphasize what we have lost. The boys, men of 25 now, are strong, individualistic, intelligent and handsome as young gods. Many are also cruel, arrogant and violent, and this has been found to be true of Omegas all over the world. . . . The female Omegas have a different beauty, classical, remote, listless, without animation or energy. . . . Like their male counterparts, they seem incapable of human sympathy. Men and women, the Omegas are a race apart, indulged, propitiated, feared, regarded with a half-superstitious awe. (18).

There is a distinction drawn in the novel between English Omegas—worshiped, feared, envied—and the Omegas from other, presumably lesser, nations who are essentially slaves. This distinction serves as a reminder of the historical imperialism of England within the novel, and also lessens the humanity of the Omegas. The perceived differences between this single generation and all others sets them apart, and makes them unnatural, or un-nature-like. It is as though the fact of their being the last of their kind, despite the reality that they did not choose the distinction, marks them. They seem to be blamed for being Omegas as well as to be seen as the victims of it. The blame is not spoken aloud, but it is there in the way we see the Omegas through Theo's eyes. Of the Omegas, he writes, "If from infancy you treat children as gods, they are liable in adulthood to act as devils" (James 19). The differences in how they were raised would stem from their singular distinction of being the last of their kind, and turned them into

something other than human. The reader never gets close enough to the Omegas through the eyes of Theo Faron to really see them as anything but completely alien forms of life.

There is a melancholy about the way the reader does see Omegas. These are the last babies on earth, the last children, and they are lost to the older generation. The older generations are denied the maternal and paternal outlet they hunger for by this generation of the young who seem so very separate from the rest of mankind. Sadder than any of the other age or social group is the one to which Theo belongs, those in between—not elderly, missing out on the pain of universal infertility by a generation, nor to the pampered Omegas. Young enough to bear children, old enough to feel the keen loss both personally and collectively, they mourn the end of humanity more intensely than the others. The women carry around life-like baby dolls and hold christenings for kittens, their hunger to be maternal seeking any outlet it can find. Their maternal or paternal instinct leads people to garden, golf, and lose themselves in the pleasures of books, nature, and wine. Theo, who revels in the melancholy beauties of nature to assuage his own loss, was a father. He and his wife had a daughter. She missed Omega by only three years. She was killed at the age of two by Theo who, thinking his wife was watching the child, backed his car up over the toddler. As a father guilty of the accidental death of his only child, Theo offers a poignant platform from which to witness the pathos of his bleak generation. Miriam is an excellent example of the displacement of the people in the in-between generation. Trained as a midwife, she works in the checkout line of a grocery store because there is no longer a call for her skill. The Omegas, the elderly, the Sojourners (an imported slave class) and finally the pitiable

middle-aged make up a class structure with its own rules and lines--these roles are as staunch as caste lines and all but the slave-class of the Sojourners are culturally permissible due to the shift in human biology that has left humans infertile, and now that the youngest are twenty-five and older, without any more children. The lines are reinforced by the strictures of the government, the empire that Xan has created. The rigidity in the society harkens back to those golf courses, and speaks of a need for control over the environment that is so great it leaves no room for what is natural, but only what is "nature-ish". The roles people have are now more rigidly defined and monitored by authorities who are always watchful of people who will become a burden to society. This speaks of that deeply rooted hunger humans have for control over their world, especially controlling who will and who will not be allowed to be a part of the world they create.

The government in James's novel further intrudes on the lives of the citizens of England with mandatory yearly semen testing and compulsory gynecological exams, in the hopes of finding people who are fertile. Only those deemed fit and appropriate are tested. Xan has no desire to reestablish the future of humanity with anyone he deems morally corrupt or physically undesirable. He manages to disparage Julian's unfitness for the role of the mother of the next generation, saying, "She may be the most important person in the world but . . . the child she is carrying is still the child of a whore" (256). He wants not only physical fitness, but moral fitness according to his own judgment of what is and is not moral. In trying to determine who fathered Julian's baby, Theo learns that "Luke was exempt from testing. He had mild epilepsy as a child. Like Julian, Luke was a reject" (207). Julian's withered arm exempted her from the testing, or

rather, disqualified her from the governmental standards of who should or should not be allowed to reproduce, should the ability be present. Toward the end of the novel, when Xan arrives at the nativity scene of Julian's baby, he declares that in light of this new development, "We'll redouble the testing programme. We've been getting careless. We'll test everyone. The epileptic, deformed—every male in the country" (257).

Again the class structure is seen, built not of money or on education, but on health, perfection, and age, and maintained by governmental policy as humans try desperately to maintain control over the world while they slip into extinction. It is only desperation that will open the door to allow those considered to be inferior to be looked at as worthy of furthering the species. It is desperation that lets them join humanity instead of remaining "other". Here we see the same failure to see humanity as part of nature rather than separate from nature. It is not through a controlled and planned breeding program that Julian conceives. That happens on its own without tests or governmental interference. It is natural. It is a return to doing what the beasts of the field do. This argument goes back to that overriding need for control that humanity seems to have. They want control over all aspects of society and environment and when they cannot control something—as they cannot control the epidemic infertility—the response is to more rigidly control what they can control.

The lines between "us" and "them" are constantly redrawn in the novel. "Us" becomes Theo, Julian, Miriam, and the unborn child. "Them" encompasses Xan, the Omegas, the Sojourners, and the remaining members of Julian's little band of rebels as they slowly are lost to the group. The futility of such a division is seen a few times only

to be cast aside. Speaking to Julian about the cruelty in bringing a child into the world as it is today, Theo pleads,

What sort of life will this child have? . . . Suppose this child is the only one. To what sort of hell are you condemning her? Can you imagine the loneliness of her last years—over twenty appalling, endless years with no hope of ever hearing another human voice? (237).

The Road is darker, bleaker, all but dead—not just the humans, everything—and the implication, never explicitly stated, is that this terminal disaster was a manmade event. The world is plunged into nuclear winter, the sun hidden behind clouds of ash. Nothing grows. Everything is dead or dying and the world is barely peopled with those who have not died yet. There will not be survivors here. Even the whisper of hope at the very end of the novel is too frail to withstand the catastrophe.² The human race, even while it dies, biologically, wants to survive. There are pregnancies in *The Road*, but there are no children except the boy, who is kept alive against his own mother's wishes and by his father's heroic and constant efforts. There are babies, but none that the protagonists ever see alive.

² McCarthy takes some scientific license within the novel—despite widespread famine and starvation, his women still conceive and carry to term. In speculative fiction, such unrealities are often forgiven due to the fantastic nature of the story itself. For the sake of argument, we, too, will allow ourselves to disregard a biological reality that in times of famine and starvation women rarely conceive and even more rarely do they carry a baby to term. Perhaps the kindest way to look at the disparity in the novel is to attribute the fecundity displayed as a primordial imperative for survival of the species.

What does a dying species do with its young? What do you do with babies who will grow up to be competitors for scant and dwindling resources? Like rodents, or big cats, or the polar bears recently filmed cannibalizing their cubs, the humans devour the young. The killing of infants could be a mercy, chosen to spare them the endless silent years that Theo Faron fears for Julian's baby in *The Children of Men*, and once the child is dead, there is no point wasting the "meat". The scant population in *The Road* have learned to waste nothing as evidenced by the careful way the father will pick out anything useful from the detritus they encounter, to the basement full of chained people being kept alive so that they can be slowly eaten by their captors, like lobsters in a tank.

Expulsion is key in both of these novels; their societies, in an effort to preserve themselves, expel that which they most need to survive. The political actions enforced to maintain a culture and a society in the face of potential extinction manage to toss away the very tools that would be most useful in preserving the society. Luke and Julian do not qualify for fertility testing, and yet it is they who produce a viable pregnancy. The Omegas, who face the reality that one day they will be the last people on earth, are so far removed from humanity that they kill Luke in a violent and meaningless ritualistic dance, beating him to death and moving on without so much as a sensible word to anyone. Xan's declaration that Julian is a whore diminishes her value. He will marry her, but he has no respect for her. The role of these potential saviors is denigrated and reduced even in the moments when their actions are proven to be of value.

. Part of the intrigue *The Children of Men* offers is the way infertility is not about the denigration of women over men, because of the acknowledgment—one that departs from most other literature involving infertility--that the sterility is not a female condition,

but a human one. *The Road* goes a step further and renders the planet sterile. It echoes the mass extinctions of the past, most notably the meteor that science has popularized as having brought about the extinction of the dinosaurs. Reading these novels together with an eye to their common messages is like peering through Alice's looking glass to see opposite worlds. Both are dying, but the nature of the deaths are so different and the response by the victims in the face of the inevitable demise of their species is as disparate as the means to those ends. Theo Farran's England is about hedonism—eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die—but hedonism under regimental control, pleasure to lull, rather than to free, the citizens.. People can only watch as the natural world, that humans have worked so hard to control and dominate, slowly and steadily “evicts” them, by taking back the land one playground at a time. *The Road* is peopled with dwindling packs of determined hunter-gatherers in an increasingly barren land. The implications of this end to the planet speak of a beginning yet to come, a beginning based on the geological record of past cataclysmic events. Scenes in the novel, like the man and his son listening to the trees falling in the distance, or walking through an orchard to collect dried apples, serve to remind the reader that the seeds of new life on earth rest just under the layers of ash, and, like the forests after a fire, someday those seeds will grow. The new beginning, however, is one that people will not be around for. The humans, who likely caused this annihilation, are not going to survive to see the next age, but there will be a next age even without them.

The imagery in *The Road* is particularly bleak and hopeless. The sun is hidden by ash, everywhere the man and his son travel, they find evidence of disaster—bodies melted into asphalt, dead forests literally falling down around them, thick layers of ash

and dust, nothing growing, nothing clean. It really does look like the end of the world, the end of life on planet earth. But it is impossible to ignore the reality interwoven in the speculative fiction. Our planet has suffered such destruction on a massive scale before, and while all the dominant life died, other forms of life did not, nor did the planet itself. Richard Cowen writes of a previous cataclysmic event, the:

The K-T extinctions were worldwide, affecting all the major continents and oceans Despite the scale of the extinctions, however, we must not be trapped into thinking that the K-T boundary marked a disaster for all living things.

A brief internet search for pictures of the K-T boundary offers striking photos of sedimentary rock where even the untrained lay person can see the distinct layer of ash—several inches to several feet thick, sandwiched between normal everyday rock layers. For anyone familiar with the K-T boundary, it is difficult to read the descriptions in *The Road* without seeing that sedimentary layer of ash and all that it represents. It is a record of that catastrophe and it is easy to imagine as one reads the final words in *The Road* that, someday, in some far distant future, some other intelligent life will have developed on earth and be able to look back and see another line of ash—all that remains of the hero and his son and their quest.

The construction of time is difficult to follow in the text. The text itself could span months or it could span years, we really cannot say. For the reader, it is an endless series of days full of ash and hunger, punctuated by moments of horror or relief. The regular markers of time, as we reckon it, are absent--no seasons, no holidays, no

birthdays, no clocks or calendars. Even the days and nights blend into a general darkness, the days being only slightly less dark than the nights. In a world where there is no time, time can be seen in expansive terms, huge geological eras that follow planetary life spans rather than human ones. Time in the James novel seems compressed, there is so little of it left that each season is felt more keenly than the one before as they draw closer and closer to the final season. In the McCarthy novel, time expands, accordion-like. This expansion leads us to take a more universal—as in on a scale with the universe itself—view of the situation. The ash renders the world of the man and boy small in the immediate, encompassing only what they can see, but by taking away the edges of the world, blurring the edges, the planet—like time—becomes a place without edges, expansive in the potential realms that hide behind the ash, while the dimness keeps the immediate world small and close, like standing in a thick fog. It becomes the universe, and as such it gains a universe-sized time frame. This catastrophe will surely be the end of our protagonists and the end of humanity, but not the end of the world. The world is more enduring than man and his eventual demise; it will weather the catastrophes, eliminate them, and then move on. Maybe the morel apples beneath the bare feet of the man and his son will leave behind a seed. Perhaps there is yet “life in the deep. Great squid propelling themselves over the floor of the sea in the cold darkness. Shuttling past like trains, eyes the size of saucers” (McCarthy 90). While the population in *The Children of Men* dies surrounded by glorious life, the impression one receives from *The Road* is only an historical assurance that the earth has survived this before and will again and we are unnecessary to the process.

The two novels show their versions of human devastation in such different guises and different colors. *The Road* is gray and ash-covered, *The Children of Men* is green-- everything is verdant and lush. Both conditions are equally destructive to humanity. It is a melancholy sadness Theo records as he and his generation come to terms with the end of humanity:

Pleasure need not be less keen because there will be centuries of springs to come, their blossoms unseen by human eyes, the walls will crumble, the trees die and rot, the gardens revert to weeds and grass, because all beauty will outlive the human intelligence which records, enjoys and celebrates it We can experience nothing but the present moment, live in no other second of time, and to understand this is as close as we can get to eternal life. But our minds reach back through centuries for the reassurance of our ancestry and, without hope of posterity, for our race if not for ourselves, without the assurance that we being dead yet live, all pleasure of the mind and senses seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defenses shored up against our ruins (17).

Time has power only when there is a future. With no future to speak of, the past and the present seem so much closer together. Theo goes on a pilgrimage to visit ancient sites and say his goodbyes to them as though they are his friends, and he knows they will outlast him. The past has a future, humanity does not.

This same melancholy understanding that only the echoes of humanity will remain on the earth is set out more simply, but no less poetically in *The Road*:

What is that, Papa?

It's a dam.

What's it for?

It made the lake. Before they built the dam that was just a river down there. The dam uses the water that ran through it to turn big fans called turbines that would generate electricity.

To make lights.

Yes. To make lights. . . .

Will the dam be there for a long time?

I think so. It's made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands even.

Do you think there could be fish in the lake?

No. There's nothing in the lake (12).

The reflections of the two worlds show the same image—we will be gone, a tiny part of the whole, as dispensable as the dinosaurs and the dodo bird. The earth will not mourn our passing. It will only slowly cover and destroy the remnants we leave behind, turning cement to sand and gardens to forests. The image of the dam is reminiscent of the golf

courses in *The Children of Men*. It is man-made, disruptive, damaging to the environment and designed for the convenience of people, the water diverted to make room for communities or to irrigate fields and provide cities with water.

The longevity of the world in both novels, of nature, invites a reprise of the discussion about nature and our place within the framework. Do we belong to nature? Or are we part of it? If we are part of it, then are our actions and the repercussions thereof also part of nature? Or do we really need to look at nature as something outside ourselves? Is it preferable to understand ourselves as both a part of and separate from nature, and if so, are we capable of that dualistic viewpoint? If we are part of nature, then are the things we do to the environment natural? If we are separate from nature, it is easier to feel entitled to do as we please with the environment and, for some people, more important that we take responsibility for our environmental choices. Some critics prefer this means of examination. Karen J. Warren writes: "Important connections exist between the treatment of women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and the treatment of nonhuman nature on the other" (Cook 68). Her words remove us from the equation and allow us to examine nature as separate from ourselves, but reflective of ourselves as well. Within these two novels, the genders are not as widely separated as the subject of infertility would traditionally separate them. Men and women alike are suffering infertility in *The Children of Men*. Men and women alike are facing the scarcity and destruction in *The Road*. One must step back further to see the gendered commentary the texts offer. "Mother Earth", "Mother Nature", so often our planet is seen as female. It is an easy fit as the earth is what sustains us and keeps us alive, it nurtures us. Mother Nature births all life and is the source of all that we have and are. In

both novels, there is a particular scene that evokes this birthing, the origins of life, the womb of the world. Both scenes take place at the edge of a body of water. Once again the scenes reflect each other in the skewed, oppositional, and yet congruous looking glass mirror images. The man and his son, on the road to nowhere in particular, reach the sea:

They stood on the rock jetty and looked to the south. A gray salt spittle lagging and curling in the rock pool. Long curve of beach beyond. Gray as lava sand. The wind coming off the water smelled faintly of iodine. That was all. There was no sea smell to it. . . .
Glass floats covered with a gray crust. The bones of seabirds. At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast sepulchre (McCarthy 91).

Whatever sea this is, it is dead. It is not blue. The concept of it not smelling like the sea is highly evocative. By invoking the sense of smell, McCarthy invites the reader to recall that green, lively scent that sea air has to it, and then to try and picture the ocean without that scent. The greenness is gone. The life is gone. This spot, this shore line, it is the birthplace of life. The oceans are the source of life, the primordial ooze and here there is only salty air and the whiff of iodine and the jagged teeth around the gaping maw—*vagine dentata*. If the ocean is the womb of the world, this one has become vicious and deadly. It delivers only death and is hostile, cold, and unwelcoming. As familiar things are stripped from the world—things, the names of things—we even lose the scent of things. The powerful trigger that scent is to memory is stolen in that way

and somehow that impacts the memories. Only the man has those memories and it is easy to forget that until the boy reminds us in his simplistic way that his world and the world of his father's memories are vastly different. For the boy, the sea has only the scent of ozone and iodine that it now has. The green smell never belonged to the sea, for the boy.

Green smell or no, it is the sea and the boy is a child and responds to the call of the surf as children do. He wants to go swimming. His father lets him go, with a warning that it will be very cold. The boy does not care, "he went running down the beach. So white. Knobby spinebones. The razorous shoulder blades sawing under the pale skin. Running naked and leaping and screaming into the slow roll of the surf" (89). It is a brief glimpse of something almost normal for a child. Almost. But nothing is really normal for this boy or, rather, his sense of what is normal entails a horrific, slow death of the planet. He was born the night the earth died. He has never known electricity, or a safe house, or the security of enough food to eat. He knows death and loss and the memories of his father of a world he was denied. His birth is quite literally paired with the end of the world in the novel. This pairing provides the reader with two different perspectives from which to see the world as it is. We see it through the nostalgic eyes of the father, and the pragmatic eyes of the son. The son mourns with his father for the loss of the past, but in an entirely different way than his father does. He does not remember electricity or penguins or the sun. The sea for him is not blue. It has never been blue and will never be blue. Blue seas are myths:

By the time he came out he was blue with cold and his teeth were chattering. He walked down to meet him and wrapped him

shuddering in the blanket and held him until he stopped gasping.

But when he looked the boy was crying. What is it? he said.

Nothing. No, tell me. Nothing. It's nothing (89).

That is all there is for this boy, nothing; nothing and someone else's memories of a past that is not real, and the promise of a future that is equally not real. Later, the man and his son argue over the treatment of a thief who had taken all they had. They catch the thief and the man strips him of everything, even his shoes. The boy cannot stop crying and his father in frustration declares that the boy is not the one who has to worry about everything, "The boy said something but he couldn't understand him. What? He said. He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one" (105). And he is. His father will not live forever, and in fact dies before the end of the novel. The boy is left with the knowledge he has gleaned in his short life to help keep him alive, and an optimism that is too pure and too intact to be fully believable by the devastated reader. During a "down moment", with the boy sullen and watching over his injured father, the father tries, as always to coax the boy into talking. He offers to tell a story but the boy declines. So he asks for a story, but again the boy declines saying:

. . . but stories are supposed to be happy.

They don't have to be.

You always tell happy stories.

You don't have any happy ones?

They're more like real life.

But my stories are not.

Your stories are not. No.

The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad?

What do you think?

Well I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here.

Yeah.

You don't think that's so great.

It's okay (109).

The father suggests he share a dream, but the boy says he only has bad dreams, but that's okay because "good dreams are not a good sign." One might suspect that at the end of the novel, the man who finds the boy and invites him home with him where they have a daughter they did not eat is just a dream, the dream the boy sinks into when he is finally abandoned to the nothingness of the world. The coincidence and hope seem far too good to be true and the reader knows, along with the boy, that good things are not to be trusted in this dying world. Perhaps sinking into a safe, good dream is the kindest way to perish. The final paragraph returns the reader to the watery womb of life. The scene is as dreamlike as the family the boy finds, or manufactures. This stream is only a memory of a memory, but it is also potential. This water is not gray and dead though, it holds life and promise, and Brook trout:

You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins whimped softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that wire maps of the world in it's becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back (115).

Nothing can be put back. There is no map to follow, no maze to solve to make things return to the way they were. The hope is that when the ash finally settles and time works its magic, there might be new life in the soupy remnants of the dead world. This is the real hope in the novel. Not that there is hope for man, there is none, but that there is hope for life and for the earth. There is hope that the damage done to it can be healed someday, even if the price of that healing is the elimination of "the human intelligence which records, enjoys and celebrates" the earth (James 17).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate man and nature in the novels. And there is no question that what is taking place in the worlds of these novels impacts the culture and societies, or lack thereof. Society follows biology, being reshaped and reformed to fit the changes that are happening. No matter if it is the importing of a slave class, or the literal devouring of the young, the actions and expressions of society and "civilization" are dictated by the biological and ecological realities around them. Ecology organizes and dictates what society will be with an increasing intensity in these novels, until ultimately the ecology of both novels will eject humanity and move forward without it, or rather simply persist without truly being affected by the extinction of just one more species. What the characters in both novels fail to do is to identify themselves with

nature and thereby claim a perpetual stake in existence. They are never able to believe that the fact that nature will go on means that, in the way in which all life is connected and dependent and woven together, they will go on too. For them, they are being expelled as surely and fully as Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden.

While everything is dying in *The Road*, Theo and his companions must watch a world that is already encroaching on the dwindling human population. Here, too, we have a glimpse of life at its primordial source, only this body of water is not a jagged barren tomb. As Julian's time for delivery draws near, she, Theo, and Miriam are searching for a safe place and Theo brings them to the edge of a pond, in an area he knows from his youth. This pond is the soupy mixture of life, so rich and alive one would half expect a fish to sprout legs and come crawling out onto the banks:

The surface of the pond—it was hardly a lake—was so thickly strewn with the green blades of fallen leaves and water weeds that it looked like an extension of the glade. Beyond this green and shivering cover the surface was viscous as treacle, beaded with minute bubbles which gently moved and coalesced, broke apart, burst and died (James 235).

The abundance of life makes it no less awe inspiring, a sapling across the pond is so delicate and beautiful that the “first light of the sun” make it seem “as if the air was hung with delicate pellets of gold” (253). It is in this little Eden that the trio learns they are being hunted and realize they have to get rid of their car. And it is also here that the wonder of Julian's pregnancy is subsumed for Theo under the weight of the life that they

will be condemning the child to—a life of silence, and loneliness, “appalling, endless years.” As they sink the car into the pond to hide it, Theo has a horrifying thought,

. . . vivid as a nightmare, but one which he could not hope to banish by waking. They were all trapped together in the sinking car, water pouring in, and he was searching desperately for the handle, trying to hold his breath against the agony in his chest, wanting to call out to Julian but knowing that he dare not speak or his mouth would be clogged with mud. She and Miriam were in the back drowning and there was nothing he could do to help (238).

They watch as the pond completely covers the car, hiding it fully, the rich mud obscuring every trace that it had ever been.

This pond has no jagged teeth surrounding it and yet it devours them with its abundance of rich life. It devours the car as the earth is devouring the cities and roads and fields. Here nature once again shelters and protects in an odd blend of protectiveness and indifference. It swallows the evidence that they had been there at all in a warped reflection of the way the planet is slowly swallowing mankind. Oh, there is a final gasp, a baby boy to be born, a final defiant newborn cry, but ultimately, human kind will vanish, submerged beneath the fecundity of a planet that does not need people to survive. The womb of the world reabsorbs her creation and uses the nourishment provided to create more life. She does not rely on those who observe, record, enjoy, and celebrate her. This mother of us all offers a cruel comparison to the women in the novel denied motherhood. She takes no pity on the sad creatures that suffer hysterical

pregnancies, carry around life-like infant dolls, and perform religious ceremonies to welcome a litter of kittens as tiny, furry, substitute babies. If they are not mothers too, it does not matter to Mother Nature and no amount of worship or hope or prayer will change anything. The earth's own maternity, in the sense that it houses and carries on it all life, is massive and varied and does not require us. We require her, but she will be fine without us. In that anthropomorphic way of humans, the characters see nature as laughing in the face of all our science and technology, which are unable to solve the mystery of the global infertility, nor find any solution. Non-human nature goes along blithely as humanity struggles with a biological deficiency that it cannot resolve. Grass and flowers cover old school yards and play-grounds. The sea takes in the suicides without complaint--ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

The two very different images of the source of life both convey the same message: humans are not indispensable. These mother-earth images in both novels, these hostile wombs that abandon their children to death, are thought to act as a reversal of how people have treated the earth. The disasters in both novels are at once distant and immediate, the sudden abandonment of humanity to its terminal existence.

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn't answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the window glass (McCarthy 25).

That is all. That is the beginning of the end for the father and his son who is still in his mother's womb when the world ends. The world ends quietly in *The Children of Men*, as well, as Miriam describes her own recognition of the termination of fertility:

I remember booking a patient for her next appointment and suddenly noticing that the page seven months ahead was blank. Not a single name. Women usually booked in by the time they'd missed their second period, some as soon as they'd missed one. Not a single name. (James 165).

The abandonment is as swift and cruel and as heatless as the act of a teen who tosses a new born into the trash can while it is still crying feebly and grasping for life. It would seem as though humans are treated as recklessly and with as little concern as we so often show to the earth. The act of thoughtless, meaningless murder is reflected in two particular deaths within the novels: the suicide of the boy's mother, and Theo Faron's accidental killing of his fifteen-month-old daughter. Both deaths are so pointless and insensible, foreshadowing the pending pointless and insensible end to humanity. There is hardly room to mourn the losses, and little energy in those who remain for mourning. There is some guilt, some resentment, but they are such small things to mourn in the face of the disaster for the whole species. And likewise, the species is such a small thing to mourn for the earth in either setting. She is too busy with the business of the rest of life, and the preparation for healing to concern herself with the last efforts of a dying race. The reality and the perception differ though, because in truth there is no malevolent or even ambivalent force trying to squash the human race. Nature isn't acting against humanity. Events are merely progressing toward their natural end, as

they would do with any species. The fact that humans are able to be cognizant of the loss of their own species, as they are about the loss of other species, doesn't indicate a malicious outside force, but instead reinforces the fact that the very concept of nature itself is a human construction. Our awareness of our own existence and of the potential for our non-existence is a fact separate from that existence. Humanity would exist even if they were not conscious of the fact, and they would conceivably cease to exist at some point, as well.

Not all mothers are good. Sometimes parents kill themselves. Sometimes parents kill their children. There is nothing compassionate or fair in the process, but nature is not compassionate. Nature is not fair. Nature simply is. There is no malice in the destruction of life; death is a part of the cycle—the earth exfoliating and cleansing itself. The loss of humans is not really a loss at all. It is just a change, and just one among countless others. The casual disregard we show the planet amounts to about the same that the planet shows to the protagonists in these novels and to humanity as a whole. Our hubris in thinking that a species as young as ours would be forever rulers of the earth is stripped away and left to fossilize in the ashes and soil with the bones of our reptilian predecessors and the countless human dead. Life is not a “right” at all. It is a fragile state of being as easily lost as it was found, as swiftly taken as it was given. The classes we align ourselves in, those who eat and those who are eaten, they are all the same at the end of the world. Those social constructs do not matter when there is no power in them. The two reverse images in these works of fiction remind us of the same truth:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (Shakespeare).

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