

# A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Una redefinición posapocalíptica del espacio en *The Road*, de Cormac McCarthy

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**Abstract:** Homelessness undergoes an important change in a post-apocalyptic setting: it becomes the norm, the only reality for the survivors. Through a process of defamiliarization and reinterpretation of the new reality, space goes back to its mythical sphere, where a permanent sense of anxiety and distress dominates everything. In the present paper, a new vision of homelessness in the characters and spaces portrayed in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is presented. Focusing on the new spatial conception will offer a fresh perspective to interpret how a father struggles in his attempts to instill in his boy a strong system of moral values while travelling through the vastness of a space without boundaries that only has one defining and common characteristic: the road.

**Keywords:** Homelessness; space; place; redefinition; post-apocalypse.

**Summary:** Introduction. Topophobia and Existential Angst: The Fighting Response of the Rebel. Crisis of Values: Defamiliarization of Reality and Mythmaking. Redefinition of Spaces, Places, and Language. The Road as Means and Goal: The Final Space. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** La falta de hogar experimenta una importante transformación en los entornos posapocalípticos: se convierte en el único criterio en la realidad de los supervivientes. Gracias a un proceso de desfamiliarización y reinterpretación de la nueva realidad, el espacio vuelve a su esfera mítica, donde impera una situación permanente de ansiedad y angustia vital. En el presente artículo presentamos una nueva visión del concepto de *falta de hogar* a través de los personajes y espacios de la novela de Cormac McCarthy *The Road*. Al focalizar el estudio en esta nueva concepción espacial lograremos una perspectiva inédita con que interpretar las dificultades que el padre encuentra al inculcar en su hijo un estricto conjunto de valores morales. Esto ocurre mientras atraviesan la vastedad ilimitada de un espacio con una única característica común: la carretera.

**Palabras clave:** Sin techo; espacio; lugar; redefinición; posapocalipsis.



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**Sumario:** Introducción. Topofobia y angustia existencial. La respuesta combativa del rebelde. Crisis de valores: desfamiliarización de la realidad y construcción del mito. Redefinición de espacios, lugares y lenguaje. La carretera como medio y como fin: el espacio final. Conclusión.

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## INTRODUCTION

Homelessness has always been a situation suffered by a minority of the population in any given society, but what would happen if homelessness became the social norm, the only reality for all the existing people? What would happen if a catastrophic disaster hit the planet and the survivors were faced with the hardships and exertions of living (or rather surviving) among the remains of their previous civilization? This article focuses on Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* to review how the concept of space, and especially homelessness, is transformed in a post-apocalyptic setting. McCarthy's novel allows us to witness the results of a process of defamiliarization and reinterpretation of social spaces and spatial practices by representing an environment demarcated by a constant sense of existential anxiety and the unavoidable presence of violence.

And it is precisely the absence of social spaces, as much as the lack of a sense of home, that triggers such feelings of fear and anxiety for the anonymous father and son, the homeless protagonists of the novel. However, their plight only partially adheres to the peculiar conditions of the homeless in the contemporary world. Homelessness is generally understood as the absence of home—lacking a proper space to inhabit—and it has always been a situation experienced by a small part of the population in any given society. The United Nations defined the concept of homeless household as “those households without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers, or in any other space, on a more or less random basis” (United Nations 2005). The definition of homelessness comes into conflict with the concept of poverty (and with the establishment of the limits of extreme poverty) and, thus, it is very difficult to demarcate. Nevertheless, many authors such as Kusmer or Rossi have pointed out that a key characteristic of homelessness is that it is normally a transitory condition: “Most [people]

are homeless for a few months at a stretch, but many had several episodes of homelessness over the years” (Rossi 9).

We understand post-apocalyptic fiction as a subgenre of science fiction concerned with the fate of the human species after the end of civilization due to an apocalyptic incident. This subgenre constitutes, according to Daguet and Liénard-Yeterian, a topos of the horror. The apocalypse is revealed as a particularly violent and total form of destruction, a catastrophe, a complete obliteration of things and beings, of the world they inhabit and from which horror always emerges (Daguet 798). In this sense, *The Road* is a perfect example of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre presenting the horrible hardships suffered by the survivors of the apocalypse. Given the special conditions faced by the survivors of an apocalyptic event, the concept of homelessness completely changes and becomes the general condition that applies to everybody. There exists no more private property (at least regarding real state) and the notion of home has changed to the extent that it has been generally forgotten, so homelessness becomes the real status quo of the whole (remaining) society. The traditional notion of *home* as the corner of our world, our first known universe (Bachelard 4) which represents an intimate space of belonging has lost its original meaning completely. Gaston Bachelard considers home as a space of dreaming, and more specifically, daydreaming:

... if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths. (6)

In a post-apocalyptic setting, where characters must face feelings of fretfulness and despair generated after the advent of the catastrophe, this safe haven, this space for daydreaming which also acts as the axes of coordinates for the human perception of place simply disappears. Without it, as Bachelard points out, human beings turn into dispersed beings (7) and feel completely clueless and lost. Uprooting is the standard situation for the vast majority of the survivors, and most of the times, they have to face tremendously adverse conditions without the comforting notion of returning home at the end of their vicissitudes. The ‘outside’ world is the only thing that remains, and in the case of *The*

*Road*, that world is very close to Bachelard's depiction of the 'winter cosmos':

In any case, outside the occupied house, the winter cosmos is a simplified cosmos. . . . The house derives reserves and refinements of intimacy from winter; while in the outside world, snow covers all tracks, blurs the road, muffles every sound, conceals all colors. As a result of this universal whiteness, we feel a form of cosmic negation in action. (40)

That 'universal whiteness' described by Bachelard is a recurrent theme in *The Road*, where the nuclear winter ravages the remainders of human civilization covering everything in blinding tonalities of white and grey. That feeling of "cosmic negation in action" derived from the winter cosmos is opposed to the space of dreamers experienced at 'home,' and it will contribute to aggravate the existential anxiety experienced by the characters.

### **1. TOPOPHOBIA AND EXISTENTIAL ANGST: THE FIGHTING RESPONSE OF THE REBEL**

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* depicts the survival story of a father and his son after an apocalyptic event that has destroyed presumably the entire planet (or at least the United States) and their expedition towards the south and the sea trying to seek salvation. The traditional figure of the lone survivor travelling towards the American frontier has been modified since the myth of the wild American conqueror has disappeared in *The Road* because the essential protagonist giving birth to not only the myth, but to the nation itself, is simply gone (Daguet 799). But the father still shares the main characteristics of the 'lone ranger' figure: he relies on no one, he is forced to use violence to defend his interests, he is a fighter who does not give up (a rebel), he is on a journey towards the frontier, and he is inherently homeless.

That inherent homelessness appears due to the fact that the concept of home in *The Road* has been deprived of its original meaning of a safe, intimate place, a place of belonging. Tim Cresswell poses that "intimate places are places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss" (137), but in *The Road*, former 'homes' have become dangerous places inscribed with a strong feeling of what Yi-Fu Tuan characterizes as 'topophobia': a mixture of fear and anxiety triggered by a stressful environment which appears associated to a place.

Different factors contribute to increase feelings of stress and fear in *The Road*: the presence of human noises which mean potential danger; the vastness of the space in front of them that produces an effect of not feeling 'at home,' a fear of getting lost; or the aforementioned blinding whiteness are some key factors that exemplify this feeling of topophobia.

In this environment, the bond between place and person has disappeared. For the character of the boy, the concept of home never had the same meaning as for his father because he never experienced it; for him it is just another unknown word related to an unfamiliar reality. All the characters appearing in *The Road* have become homeless in an absolute sense: they have been deprived of their place of abode and the concept of home has either changed its nature from what was originally understood (adults) or never existed at all (boy). This deprivation of home affects the characters in all respects; not only physically or socially, but even ontologically, redefining key existential aspects such as the concepts of righteousness, compassion, morality, or hospitality understood as the condition of existence.<sup>1</sup>

Being deprived of home and facing the hardships of a brutal, dying world that will push them to their limits, a powerful impulse appears and drives these characters' motivations in such a post-apocalyptic background. That inexorable impulse is what philosopher Martin Heidegger called existential anxiety or *Angst*, as Gauthier surmises:

On Heidegger's account, the only time that man becomes conscious of his everyday inauthenticity is when he experiences anxiety (*Angst*). In anxiety, man's primordial homelessness becomes manifest. This is to say, man comes to realize that his identity and the social order that undergirds that identity are without natural foundation. (37)

Individuals face real homelessness when they acknowledge their state of existential inauthenticity through the experience of anxiety. Anxiety reveals the insignificance of the world to the individual —“the world is absurd because the coherence that it possesses has no essential relation to the individual *qua* individual” (Gauthier 56)— and it alienates the individual who experiences a change from a state of Being-at-home to a state of not-Being-at-home: “in experiencing anxiety, we feel that we are

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<sup>1</sup> The Derridian notion of hospitality has already been thoroughly discussed by Phillip A. Snyder in his article “Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.”

not at home in the world, and experience a foretaste of our inevitable death” (57).

Heidegger also proposes the classic twofold fight or flight response when confronting a danger as the human reaction in the experience of anxiety: in the face of anxiety an individual either flies (*Flucht*) towards distractions seeking to be reabsorbed into the everyday routine, or fights adopting a resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) which unlocks their authenticity by acknowledging their existence as independent beings. The choice between the two options is voluntary and leads to either surrender or resistance. Choosing resistance in the face of anxiety can shape the characters into what Albert Camus described as ‘the rebel man’ (*l’homme révolté*), a character who presents a categorical rejection of what he considers an intrusion supported with an iron will conviction in his values: “[the rebel] implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being gratuitous that he is prepared to support it no matter what the risks” (*The Rebel* 14). The rebel man will always fight in the face of anxiety. Opposed to the rebel man stands the figure of the ‘quitter,’ the character who chooses to surrender and become what in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus calls an ‘absurd’ man; someone who abandons any notion of values in the acceptance of an unreasonable universe which cannot possibly be contested. A complete acceptance of the absurd often leads to the suicide of the character (illustrated by the character of the mother in *The Road*). This acceptance of the absurd in the face of extreme anxiety is very much related with the loss of hope, as Alan Noble points out:

[O]ur reading of *The Road* must stress the “anxiety and distress and torment” felt by the father as he lives with the obligation to keep his son alive and the knowledge that this obligation is unethical because the boy has no foreseeable future except tremendous suffering. (107)

But the father, a figure very much resembling that of Abraham as Noble explains in his article, maintains his hope against all odds, against all that anxiety, distress, and torment.

When *The Road* is analyzed from the perspective of the rebel survivor forced into homelessness two major themes stand out: anxiety and violence. This existential homelessness will lead to anxiety, and anxiety, in turn, will lead to violence. Violence is one of the most important and recurring themes in post-apocalyptic narrative. The

imposition of any attempt at a governance system, and what is more important, the mere survival of the characters, is always related to the exercise of violence. It is important to notice that the act which triggers the apocalypse always has a violent nature which eventually leads to the destruction of human society (being it a natural calamity or a consequence of direct or indirect human actions), and, thus, in a post-apocalyptic setting more than ever, violence begets violence.

## 2. CRISIS OF VALUES: DEFAMILIARIZATION OF REALITY AND MYTHMAKING

Due to the surrounding violence and the lack of significant stimuli from the outside world, the homeless characters are forced to reflect upon the meaninglessness and vanity of human existence, and that feeling provokes, besides the aforementioned existential anxiety, a crisis in the traditional moral and religious values which appear constantly questioned in the novel. The father is always referring to himself and his son as ‘the carriers of fire.’ In the traditional religious and mythical symbolism, fire presents a twofold nature: on the one hand, it represents wisdom, life, and community, and, on the other hand, it is a symbol of destruction and death.<sup>2</sup> In *The Road*, fire has devastated life (everything is burnt due to the apocalyptic event and words such as “charred,” “blackened,” “burnt,” or “smoke” infest the narrative) and even continues its destructive task in the present with intermittent forest fires. At the same time, were it not for the fires the father builds in order to cook and keep warm, they would have died in the freeze a long time ago. Fire is used by the father in his particular mythmaking where he depicts themselves as the heroic bearers of light who will not be overwhelmed in the face of the post-apocalyptic darkness:

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That’s right.

Because we’re carrying the fire.

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<sup>2</sup> Linked to Luttrull’s revision of Hesiod’s Prometheus, that presents “a twofold legacy of blessings and curses” (20): it represents civilization but, at the same time, it brings suffering and punishment.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (83)

Several authors (Cooper, Juge, Luttrull, Snyder, Wielenberg) have already studied the numerous examples of reinterpretations of classic mythical traditions appearing in *The Road*, like Plato's allegory of the Cave, the myth of Prometheus, the tradition of the Grail narrative, the tradition of hospitality and the many biblical connections presented in the narrative among others. By means of mythmaking, the father tries to build a value system around the 'carrying of the fire' for his son, in which he presents them as the 'good guys' as opposed to the 'bad guys.' The basic differences between the two groups are that 'good guys' do not rob, do not eat human beings and they do not kill, if possible. 'Good guys' also try to help other people that "could be carrying the fire too" (216), provided that they do not belong to the 'bad guys.' The boy acknowledges the necessity of being vigilant, but he struggles with the idea of killing and questions his father's doctrine whenever he uses violence against other people, whereas the father tries to lecture him about the necessity of using violence in extreme situations. Relying on the system of values taught by his father, the attitude of the boy is always helping towards the others and that concerns the father who wants to make his son understand the brutal and violent nature of the post-apocalyptic reality so that he will be able to survive. The internal moral struggles of the boy eventually lead to question his father's mythmaking method itself:

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They dont have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people. (267-68)

Mythmaking is an attempt to depict a delusional space where homelessness is not as brutal a condition as it is in their ruined reality. It is a way of coping with the anxiety produced by the fact that the world

around the characters is no longer known. The father is incapable of confronting the vastness of a devastated world that has changed so much he cannot recognize it anymore. The concept of place as a meaningful location defined by our personal experience of it has been completely destroyed and rootedness towards an intimate “enclosed and humanized space” (Tuan 54) associated with calm and stability (Tuan’s concept of place) is no longer possible. The lack of limitations and boundaries in such a chaotic post-apocalyptic environment provokes what could be interpreted as a type of agoraphobia related to the character’s inability to limit the dangerous surrounding space and the feeling of helplessness associated to it. Although it might seem contradictory, that agoraphobic feeling generates a sensation of imprisonment in the sense that the characters feel there is no possible escape from the boundless vastness in front of them. The absence of boundaries or frontiers causes a deep anxiety and shakes the very foundations of the human conception of spatiality because there cannot be spatiality if not organized by the determination of frontiers (De Certeau 123). Characters in that situation struggle to negotiate space, but post-apocalyptic space is a new type of space. It seems to have suffered a reversal: ‘places’ (understood as meaningful locations for the human being following Tuan’s approach) have become again ‘spaces’ (dynamic, changing, and related to movement) due to a sort of defamiliarization process very similar to the one described by Shklovsky when he discusses the artistic creational process:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (16)

In a post-apocalyptic world, the separation from the previous cultural or personal knowledge accumulated by human beings is so big that spaces, objects, and even subjects have become totally unfamiliar. New forms of interpretation arise, and places are transformed into spaces again because they have lost their previous meaningfulness. Toponyms are no longer meaningful and, in some cases, they are even replaced because, as Ashley Kunsu points out, language itself “has been returned to its rudiments and now must be re-imagined” (58).

### 3. REDEFINITION OF SPACES, PLACES AND LANGUAGE

New experiences and meanings are progressively attached to those spaces deprived of their original referents in an effort to recover places. In the light of an apocalyptic cataclysm, it is impossible to rely on the existence of non-experienced spaces from a theoretical point of view because the whole social infrastructure has collapsed, and the real condition of foreign locations cannot be confirmed directly. Every location the characters cannot experience through their own senses becomes part of the mythical space which Tuan describes as “a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known” (86). In *The Road*, it is easy to see the process of defamiliarization related to post-apocalyptic environments by which places are transformed into spaces again because they have suffered a separation from their previous meaning due to the changes they experienced after the apocalyptic event. Mythical space surrounds the space directly experienced by the characters, but sometimes, even that tangible, visual space becomes fuzzy and unrecognizable: when the boy asks his father “where are we?” (83) there is no possible answer to the question because there are no more known places, no more descriptive toponyms, no more meaningful locations. Analyzing spatial descriptions in *The Road*, we can witness the process of redefinition of space that father and son are performing as they carry on with their journey. In their particular exodus, they are unconsciously filling spaces with new meanings and creating new designations in an attempt to find “the God-given capacity to name the world correctly” (Kunsa 60).

The father uses the same nomenclature he is trying to teach his son inside his system of values for the description of places and, so, locations are also divided into good and bad locations. Normally (in our present society) most human constructions are considered good places; places of comfort, safety, and even intimacy—an example of this is the previously discussed concept of home—whereas wild nature is considered a dangerous place. In *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic environment, this pattern has suffered an inversion: good locations are related to wild nature and bad locations to human constructions where the ‘bad guys’ could be waiting for the couple. The possibility of an encounter with the ‘bad guys’ is what triggers a feeling of topophobia related to human constructions such as houses and shops, among others. Natural places are considered safe places to rest if they are separated enough from the road

and the cities (so that they will not attract people and also in order for the couple to have the possibility of making a fire). Some natural locations provoke a sentiment of topophilia (as opposed to topophobia), especially in the boy, but they are not apt to stay. The best example is the waterfall where they bathe and then find morels to eat. The boy says, “this is a good place, Papa,” but the father explains to his son why they cannot stay, “We cant stay, he said. It’s getting colder every day. And the waterfall is an attraction. It was for us and it will be for others and we dont know who they will be and we cant hear them coming. It’s not safe” (42). Some experiences along the journey reassured that sentiment of topophobia, transforming those places into cursed locations, such as the basement full of naked people which was used as a human pantry by the ‘bad guys.’

After that experience, the basement has been redefined as a cursed location easily associated with traditional visions of hell: it is an underground location related to torture, death, and fire where people face their own consumption (being eaten alive in this case). However, McCarthy presents another inversion of the traditional high/low patterns in *The Road*. As Tuan explained (37), superiority and excellence have always been related to the spatial concept of height whereas baseness and inferiority appear related to lowness (sacred places in upper spaces, cursed places in lower positions; always taking ourselves as the reference point), but with the advent of the apocalypse, that pattern changed. The surface of the earth has been transformed into the classical underworld; everything is dead and burnt, ashes cover the surface, charred corpses infest the streets, buildings are abandoned and destroyed, spontaneous fires consume the dead remains of the world, and human-eating ‘demons’ threaten the lives of the characters. On the other hand, the only example of a sacred location —defined by the father as a “tiny paradise” (150)— is found underground, in the same spatial position where the ‘cursed’ human pantry was. What they find in the bunker is not only food, clothes, and equipment; it is a renewed hope for life; it is their salvation. The father states, “I found everything. Everything” (70). For the father, the perspective of an imminent death has suddenly turned into a new chance to live and continue with their quest: “He’d been ready to die and now he wasnt going to and he had to think about that” (144). However, even with all the advantages and comforts that tiny paradise can offer them, it is crossed out as a dangerous place and they leave it in the end.

From a spatial perspective, the scene of the bunker is essential as an example of the process of defamiliarization and posterior redefinition of spaces and spatial practices that takes place in the narrative. The road and all the spaces surrounding it suffered a fundamental change after the apocalypse, and the appearance of re-defined spaces always demands a description of the new reality that arises with them in order to facilitate understanding characters' negotiations with space and place as well as their spatial practices. Jeremy R. Grossman discusses post-apocalyptic narrative from the perspective of the cultural politics of emotion, and from his viewpoint, post-apocalyptic narratives always present a social critique, doing so through a variety of themes. The main thesis in Grossman's dissertation on post-apocalyptic narrative is that there exists a common ground that connects the narrative elements to one another and also serves to connect the text to the reader. He calls it "remains": "pieces of the past that are lost or forgotten, but carried forward into the narrative to assist audiences in 'making sense' of The End" (Grossman 4). Remains are classified into three general categories: (a) material items from the past: material elements carried from the present which are very easy to identify for the audience, but not always so for the characters, depending on how much time passed since the apocalypse (a pair of binoculars, a can of Coca-Cola, the map of the US before the event, the gun carried by the father, the toilet in the bunker, etc.), (b) cultural knowledge: "[it] often takes the shape of an ideologically informed epistemological and/or ontological philosophy" (Grossman 7); in the case of *The Road* we have the perfect example of this in the 'good guys' vs. 'bad guys' and the 'carrying of the fire' philosophy, (c) rituals: practices that in many cases have been mythologized or sacralized with the passage of time after the apocalypse.

From a spatial perspective, it can be very useful to examine the latter remains (rituals) when considered as enacted spatial practices. In *The Road*, the best example of these rituals appears when the boy feels the necessity to say grace before the copious meal they are about to have when they find the plentiful pantry inside the bunker:

Go ahead, he said. Dont let it get cold.  
What do I eat first?  
Whatever you like.  
Is this coffee?

Yes. Here. You put butter on your biscuits. Like this.

Okay.

Are you all right?

I dont know.

Do you feel okay?

Yes.

What is it?

Do you think we should thank people?

The people?

The people who gave us all this.

Well. Yes, I guess we could do that.

Will you do it?

Why dont you?

I dont know how.

Yes you do. You know how to say thank you.

The boy sat staring at his plate. He seemed lost. The man was about to speak when he said: Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God.

He looked up. Is that okay? he said.

Yes. I think that's okay. (145–46)

This passage shows a re-enactment of the traditional Judeo-Christian ritual of saying grace before meals, except in this case the recipient of the praise is not God, but the people who saved all the food. The boy elevates people to the level of God himself because they seem to be placed in the same section inside the boy's mind: 'good guys' appear to be as magnificent as God and all of them seem to share the same unknown referent. Furthermore, his father talks of him as a god sometimes, and so, for the little boy, God, the 'good guys' who lived in the bunker, and the boy and his father belong to the same group.<sup>3</sup>

Let us notice that the boy is elevating people to the level of God while he (a god in his father's eyes) is sheltered in a bunker under the ground. It is interesting to analyze this scene from the perspective of Yi-

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<sup>3</sup> The father repeatedly presents him in these terms: "the word of God" (5), a "[g]olden chalice, good to house a god" (75), an "angel" of perhaps a "god" (172).

Fu Tuan's previously discussed high/low dichotomy: in our ideal human spatial scheme, we favor the upper spaces and we despise what appears in lower positions. In the bunker scene, we are presented with a relocation of the traditional spatial scheme. Traditionally, the figure of God (all that is good and desirable) is in Heaven (uppermost space), the devil (principle of evil, all that is bad) is in Hell (lowermost space), and people dwell in between those mythical spaces. In the aforementioned scene, 'people' —treated by the boy as a proper name: "Dear people: . . . we know that you saved it for *yourself*" (emphasis added)— are up in Heaven, God (represented by the boy) is taking shelter underground, and the 'bad guys' (evil) are between them in the surface.

In the same passage, readers are shown another ritual that is more difficult to spot in comparison with the noticeable religious tradition of the pre-meal grace saying that is the common daily routine of the breakfast. The audience feels completely identified with the breakfast components: fried ham, scrambled eggs, baked beans, biscuits with butter and coffee (waking up to the smell of fresh coffee is a well-known and vastly used cultural cliché), and with the usual practices that the boy has yet to learn: "Here. You put butter on your biscuits. Like this" (145). This is the only instance in the novel where we can find a place resembling the previously discussed concept of home: an intimate place of nurture where our needs are covered and where we establish an instant connection between our personal intimate experiences and the places where they occur. Home is a place of identity where people behave the way they truly are. Sharing breakfast in the bunker is a very important moment in the narrative for the couple because it reasserts their identity as the 'good guys' in a moment when they were on the verge of surrendering to the inhumane post-apocalyptic conditions. In the moment of saying grace the traditional spaces have been redefined, but that is the key that leads them to discover and regain their particular (tiny) paradise. They regain, even if only temporarily, something precious and lost: the concept of home.

Another example of the spatial high/low pattern inversion is found in the notion of directionality in the narrative. In the devastated world presented in *The Road*, north is related to death due to the upcoming freezing temperatures, whereas south is the goal of the characters who try to survive the post-apocalyptic weather conditions. In the case of *The Road*, the concept of goal is very much related to that of the American frontier (changing directions one more time from the West to the South).

The characters are trying to reach the only possible boundary to the immensity in front of them: the coast. The coast is a frontier, a goal, but also a refuge for hope and imagination during the journey as Walsh points out: “In the novel’s utterly dystopian setting, the South not only functions as a physical frontier and goal, but also as an imaginative refuge; quite simply, the father starts to tell, and the son longs to be told, about the South” (53). The south and the coast are the final goal for the characters of the novel, but when they arrive there, that goal proves to be no different to the space they have traversed to get there.

#### 4. THE ROAD AS MEANS AND GOAL: THE FINAL SPACE

The south is the goal and at the same time the last frontier. A frontier, as Michel De Certeau states, is a “space-between” (127) which does not belong to any of the two involved parts (in this case the road and the sea) and whose role is to act as an obstacle often to be turned into a crossing by the characters through an act of passing, but in the case of *The Road* the coast is presented as an insurmountable obstacle separating two spaces which deep down represent the same reality. In the first place, the ocean (just like all the previous spaces in the narrative) is part of the mythical space of the no longer known; an alien, deceptive space that shares all the characteristics of the solid ground behind them: the ocean was “*vast and cold and shifting* heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the *gray* squall line of ash. He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment in his face. I’m sorry it’s not blue, he said. That’s okay, said the boy” (215; emphasis added). The father describes the ocean as “one vast salt sepulcher. Senseless. Senseless” (222). The sea presents the same attributes as the previous solid space: it is vast, cold, gray, senseless, and related to death. As Collado points out, “[i]n many cultural manifestations, the sea is understood as the symbol of the maternal waters and as the main source of life” (10), but another inversion of traditional symbolism has taken place here. In addition, the road is compared metaphorically with the sea at the beginning of the narrative: “Tattered gods slouching in their rags across the waste. Trekking the dried floor of a mineral sea where it lay cracked and broken like a fallen plate” (52), thus equating the goal (the sea) and the path towards that goal (the road). The road and the ocean are two sides of the same representational space even if they seem to be opposite concepts.

The road is the only continuous recurrent space in the novel, they are always returning to the road again and again. The road has always been a transitional space, a non-place connecting two (or more) nodes.<sup>4</sup> In a typical journey, the starting point (in most of the cases coincident with the concept of home) and the goal are two definite locations related to the notion of place, whereas the path connecting these two concepts is a transitional space related to motion and dynamism. In the case of this novel, the starting point is only vaguely remembered in dreams and the goal is presented as an extension of the travelling space because there are no more places to stay; only dynamic spaces to move across without destination, as the nodes connecting transitional spaces have been destroyed. The prophetic character known as Ely states: “I was always on the road. You cant stay in one place” (168), and that is applicable to the rest of the characters in the novel; characters who are forced to keep moving embracing what seems to be a perpetual motion state following a road that leads nowhere. De Certeau reminds us: “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103), but in the case of the characters of *The Road*, the dreamed place of destination is nothing more than that: an unattainable fantasy belonging to the realm of hope.

There is no definite destination, and thus the road is always the same, even though the main characters use several different roads to travel south,<sup>5</sup> they always refer to those routes as the “road.” Perhaps the “road” is the only common noun deserving to be transformed into a proper one and referred to as the “Road,” because it describes a unique shared reality experienced by all the characters appearing in the novel.

The spatial practices carried out by those characters in that unique shared reality of the road can be interpreted as a redefined, post-apocalyptic reflection of Castells’ notion of the “space of flows” (Castells, *The Rise* 408). In *The Road*, the apocalypse comes in the peak of what Castells calls the Information Age, a period in which regions and localities become integrated in networks to conform a global ‘informational city’ understood as a process of domination of the space of flows. Castells describes the space of flows in the following terms:

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<sup>4</sup> *Non-place* for Marc Augé designates “two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (94).

<sup>5</sup> For those especially interested in the possible route followed by the characters, consult Morgan.

*The space of flows is the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows.* By flows I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society. Dominant social practices are those which are embedded in dominant social structures. By dominant structures I understand those arrangements of organizations and institutions whose internal logic plays a strategic role in shaping social practices and social consciousness for society at large. (*The Rise* 442)

The space of flows in the Information Age presents three layers of material supports: a circuit of electronic exchanges (thanks to communication and information technologies), nodes and hubs (key physical locations from which the whole process is coordinated), and the spatial organization of the dominant, managerial elites which always have specific spatial requirements. Castells argues that this space of flows has been superimposed to the traditional space of places,<sup>6</sup> but without replacing it (the majority of people live in places); and its logic and structure dominate a society that has organized its power and functions in that space of flows (*The Rise* 458).

After the apocalyptic event, the material supports of the space of flows are almost completely destroyed, as well as virtually the majority of places that made up the space of places. In the light of that situation, the remains of the former cities become the new nodes in an otherwise endless barren space resulting from the catastrophic event, and from that perspective, the scarce survivors of *The Road* would form a new set of flows, always dynamic, in perpetual motion, traveling between nodes just in order to survive. The transient homeless wanderers moving back and forth through the road constitute the new post-apocalyptic space of flows. Superimposed to the previous spatial structures (which are ruined and cannot fulfill their original purpose), these survivors become metaphorical “sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions” (Castells, *The Rise* 442). The nodes are useless once they have been deprived of their functions, but they are still points of reference connecting the only remaining network in the planet: the road.

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<sup>6</sup> Castells defines place as “. . . a locale whose form, function, and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity” (454). The main difference with the space of flows is that flows are not restrained by the boundaries of physical contiguity.

The road represents the new reality of the post-apocalyptic world: an empty, vast, desolated space leading to no destination that has to be traversed over and over in an endless pilgrimage only to reach the final oblivion so fiercely sought by the mother of the boy. In a world where the only hope the characters are able to find is a stranded ship, the *Pájaro de Esperanza* (Bird of Hope), Ely, the old prophet, predicts the end of times (ironically, an apocalypse after the apocalypse), where death itself will be the last one travelling the road:

When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say: Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that? (173)

## CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the specific aspects of homelessness and spatiality appearing in a post-apocalyptic context discussed in this paper, we can conclude that anxiety in the face of absolute homelessness and the violent nature of a vicious, merciless, and desolated world drive the characters of *The Road* into a redefinition of their values, behavior, practices, and existential perspective. The concept of place as a meaningful and experienced space is completely lost; it has been defamiliarized and only spaces (transitional, dynamic, inhospitable) remain in the post-apocalyptic reality. Existential *Angst* and a crisis of values necessarily lead to a redefinition of reality (spatially, linguistically, philosophically) and that process is perfectly illustrated in *The Road*. The father and the son try to survive and find meaning in the new post-apocalyptic reality as they traverse a never-ending road in a futile attempt to reach the final frontier/goal of a limitless sea that, in the end, turns out to be nothing but a reflection of the same road they could never leave behind.

*The Road* exhibits an original perspective in the post-apocalyptic genre: it offers new spatial negotiations emerging from the necessity to adapt to the aforementioned process of defamiliarization and, at the same time, we are presented with an innovative reshaping of ancient myths in the pursue of survival; a survival not merely physical, a survival of the basic moral human principles. Daguet and Liénard-Yeterian point out that survival is often associated to a spiritual revival (*renaissance*) in the American collective imagination, but not in *The Road*. In this novel

survival is presented as a regression to a primal wilderness which is barbaric, savage, and anarchical (Daguet 802). Maybe, we could consider that the spiritual revival *The Road* offers is the renaissance of the myth, the reinterpretation of our most treasured traditions in the face of inescapable horror as an attempt to survive, managing the space of the vicious post-apocalyptic reality in the best possible way.

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