

THE REMAINS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

Aleksandra Stojanovic
University of Kragujevac

The paper aims to introduce readers to the concept of the American dream and analyze its evolution, which takes place alongside the gradual shifts in society. In an attempt to define this elusive notion, we shall come across various meanings of the American Dream and its significance as an integral part of one's identity. The American Dream is then related to the Utopian impulse, as the author sets out to relate the pursuit of happiness to an overall prevalence of hope as a guiding factor. While Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is set in post-apocalyptic wastelands devoid of any hopes and dreams, one of the protagonists, the Boy, embodies remnants of the American Dream. The Boy thus provides hope for a brighter future, which allows him to preserve the remnants of what we call the American Dream.

Keywords: *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, American Dream, utopia, dystopia, consumerism, degradation

The American Dream represents perhaps one of the most potent social myths in the history of this nation. Due to its prevalence in multiple spheres of life and culture, it can be difficult to pinpoint a precise definition of this elusive phenomenon. Many authors, whom we consider the major American authors, have explored this concept in their writing, presenting it from various vantage points. While some chose to focus on the pursuit of wealth and fame among the middle class/immigrant population, others have dedicated their writings to a grimmer vision of this dream. The former base their narratives on the premise of "a nation in which all of us are free to develop our singularities into health, prosperity, and some measure of happiness in self-development and personal achievement" (Bloom/Блум 2009: xv). It is precisely the latter group of authors focusing on the demise of the American dream that will be our topic of interest. The paper will deal with Cormac McCarthy's representation of the United States, which is seen against the backdrop of the decline and distortion of the American Dream.

Although we may not be able to precisely define what the American dream represents in all contexts, we may provide a brief introduction to its origin and progression. James Truslow Adams is credited with coining the term “the American Dream” and using it in his work *The Epic of America* (1931). The American dream, which Adams considered the most significant aspect of American society, represents the hope and desire of the masses for a better life. The most widely accepted view of the American dream is that it envisages a society that gives equal opportunity to all citizens to work hard and achieve success. It is the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams/Адамс 1931: 404). If a person has sound moral values and a strong work ethic, then they will accomplish all they have set out to do. The American dream is typically envisioned by Americans as “financial security, home ownership, family, higher educational levels (leading to upward mobility), greater opportunities and rewards for the next generation (compared with the current generation), a successful career, freedom, happiness, and a comfortable retirement” (Wyson, Perrucci, Wright/Уайсън, Перучи, Райт 2014: 4).

With this definition in mind, the question arises whether it is possible to identify the main beneficiaries of these better living conditions. Having been disillusioned by the political events of his day (namely by the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal), Truslow begins to realize the birth of “a soulless, materialistic consumer society” (Cullen/Калън 2003: 4). The American Dream has varied to some extent over time – socially, ideologically, and culturally – since it was first espoused by the Puritan settlers, but the core values have remained the same.¹

The American Dream was regarded as a mindset, an incentive that

¹ Cullen explores various phases of the American Dream starting with what he terms “the first great American Dream” (Cullen/Калън 2003: 8), and continuing, all the way to the “final American Dream” (Cullen/Калън 2003: 9) of personal fulfillment. Of central importance here are the interpretations of the American Dream that are associated with the Declaration of Independence, the desire for upward mobility, the fight for equality in the post-Civil War era and, perhaps the most popular one, the dream of home ownership.

has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (Adams/Адамс 1931: 405)

It is small wonder, then, that people profoundly believed in the American Dream. Moreover, the anticipation of a better future offered more than hope and aspiration – it was an almost integral part of their national identity. The American Dream became part of the very structure of the nation’s mind, an inseparable piece of the identity which is recognized as “American” – the “can-do”, “everything is possible” attitude.

The reception of the American dream has greatly changed as it has “moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto” (Cullen/Калън 2003: 5). It has nevertheless become an advertising concept whose promise has largely remained unattainable. The notion looks appealing or, more precisely, it is its luring essence that has mass audience appeal. The omnipresence of the American Dream displays nothing more than the commercialization and commodification of the very term. But what is actually left of the society which once so proudly believed in improvement and progress? The concept is vital to America’s national identity, but it does not mean that it has clarity since the notion of national identity itself has become more uncertain than ever before. Previously, authors tasked themselves with presenting the rise of the American dream, but today they look at and discuss the downward trend. Contemporary authors may discuss the decline of the American dream and its current forms.

Whereas the American Dream in the past was built on a work ethic of industriousness, the consumer culture of today’s fast-paced society promotes only the bright side of life but ignores the fact that it takes great effort. As Bouza points out, “personal gratification and individual aggrandizement leads to hedonism, materialism, and consumerism-and the exaltation of the self over communal values” (Bouza/Буза 1996: 2).

Basically, what has caused social disintegration and changes in the American Dream is the dramatic decline of traditional values. "The American Dream had promised an expansive future, and what we now find is a melancholy loss of faith in America's exceptionalism, a sense of tarnished morality at odds with the official propaganda upholding America's innocence and good will" (Hume/Хюм 2000: 288). Tony Bouza enumerates some of the many problematic aspects of contemporary life such as television and consumer culture, corporate America, religion, politics, etc. In a society with a system of values so impaired that it becomes impossible to have genuine beliefs², anything may be distorted. Religion and the search for meaning have therefore been transformed into cults which may worship any array of objects. With changes in the cultural paradigm come changes in the very fabric of national identity and personal aspirations. Such environment ultimately leads to the moral and cultural wasteland caused by today's society. A society that prioritizes the needs of the flesh – materialism, consumerism and hedonism – over everything else has naturally led to the decline of the American Dream. The goal of this paper is to emphasize the novel's position in relation to the notion of the American Dream, that is, what the American Dream has been reduced to due to a capitalist and consumer culture.

The Road represents an instance where the social decline and destruction of the American Dream³ have been carried to extremes. The exaggeration serves to bring a sense of shock to the readers which will ultimately lead to the reception of McCarthy's warnings. The complete devastation of the American social fabric, the destruction of the paradigm of values and the annihilation of the American Dream may be just some of the themes that emerge in McCarthy's novel. The previously held notion of the American Dream could not survive in

² Genuine beliefs may vary from individual to individual, from one group to another given the ethnical and cultural amalgam America represents. The genuine beliefs of Puritans would not be the same as the contemporary state of affairs.

³ The American Dream in the paper is taken as a notion which represents a desire for betterment. This betterment may be seen as personal achievement, moral improvement or an aspiration towards success and financial wealth. As there is a vast array of different personalities and ambitions, the American Dream will thus vary from individual to individual.

such a cold, detached environment created by late-capitalist consumer culture. McCarthy's novel exaggerates the possible consequences of this lost battle, but nonetheless, the setting may be seen as a moral wasteland. Although the American Dream coexisted with consumer culture for a long time, the latter proved more viable. People have become distanced from their very nature and have lost touch with true family values, which created a barren landscape of pure nothingness.

The critical reviews of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* are mixed, ranging from a theological understanding focused on ethical overtones to an ecological criticism. The brutality of human nature as well as its destructive trajectory may be seen as a prominent theme among researchers who have endeavored to explore McCarthy's work. Post-apocalyptic fiction forms no small part of contemporary literature. Its appeal lies in the reader's desire to foresee as far as possible the calamitous future. In literature, hyperbolic accounts of disasters may far exceed the "average" real-life calamity, which can be so small as to be hardly noticeable. *The Road*, though overtly expressing such catastrophe, may be seen as an exaggerated representation of the shattered American Dream. The cause of the apocalyptic event in *The Road* is never stated. We do not know with certainty how it occurred or even over which period of time. The only mention of this mysterious event is: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy/Маккарти 2006: 54). The nameless, placeless and timeless nature of the event points to the universality of the condition described by McCarthy. The description of the event is so unspectacular and vague that it may not even be classified as an event in the true sense of the word. Perhaps it would be better to regard it as a non-event which either took place inconspicuously or its impact was, for one reason or another, unimportant. The decline of the American Dream may be equated with the "event" in question as the exact moment when it started to lose its previous forms cannot be pinpointed. No one is to blame for this decay. The key factor that destroyed all hope of the American Dream has remained unclear, just as the details surrounding the apocalyptic event in McCarthy's novel remain under a veil of mystery. The paper asserts that the condition in which we find

McCarthy's protagonists was created by the destructive potential of a postmodern, media-obsessed consumer culture.

The novel centers on a father and son duo trying to reach safety while attempting to protect themselves from the cannibals roaming the devastated American landscape. The question we may ask ourselves is: Who are the real cannibals and what is their sustenance? In late-capitalist consumer culture people have "eaten", i.e. destroyed, themselves. Consumer culture is openly subversive of morality and traditional values. Though seemingly plentiful and helpful, the reality the future promises is as dismal as McCarthy's portrayal of the world.

McCarthy presents us with a landscape littered with decaying remnants of a consumerist age. The crisis of modern civilization mirrors the tensions in our hypertechnological age in which people face the danger of social estrangement. Throughout the novel, the father and son come across "a palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed" (McCarthy/Маккарти 2006: 128). Oddly enough, despite the number of billboards and advertisements found in the novel there is no mention of brand names. "The deliberate act of naming in the novel is undertaken with the purpose of underlining the absence of the former world, and connecting that absence with the iconic image of global capitalism" (Šošarić/Шоштарич 2018: 351). The strength of this image lies in what has been excluded from it, thus representing the emptiness and hopelessness of the surroundings. Just as the names of all objects have slowly begun to fade, so too the consumer goods that people formerly enjoyed have begun to disappear. These "relics of consumer culture, once repositories of monetary and cultural value whose names participated in the 'sacred idiom' [...]" (Jergenson/Джергенсон 2016: 122) have now faded and lay scattered, representing the remains of the American Dream. While the protagonists struggle to follow a tattered road map in a barren landscape, the readers are faced with the same struggle in pinpointing the novel's setting. All that is presented before the readers is a shapeless darkness, almost devoid of any humanity. The road is filled with decaying objects, representing the deteriorated society.

During one of their many forages to find food, the father and son walked into a dilapidated supermarket and what they found there was a sight to behold:

By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. The father sat and ran his hands around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola. (McCarthy/Маккарти 2006: 23)

The seemingly trivial can of Coca Cola represents the significant divide between the world in its pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic state. “The supermarket epitomizes just the sort of self-consuming society McCarthy sends to its demise [...] Cannibalism as a metaphor for consumption is realized in this novel” (Donnelly 2010: 71).

Coca Cola, along with all other brand names, is not merely a product, but an ideology. The can of Coca Cola has been mythologized in the novel and injected with the meaning of an entire way of life. Hence, the previously held belief in the American Dream has been replaced by the myth of consumerism. Coca Cola typifies a critical phase in the degeneration of the American Dream. Consumerism, along with commodification and fetishism of commodities, has led to America’s downfall. The American Dream has been tainted, causing the overall grim atmosphere of the novel.

The Boy has often been described as a messianic figure – one who has the power to redeem the fallen society. He is burdened by being considered a paragon of virtue, epitomizing values such as goodness, selflessness, and sharing. However, the Boy’s messianic position in the wasteland is not religious but, in fact, utopian. What seems to one as a society that lacks any humanity and hope may be viewed from the perspective of the characters’ unwavering fight not only for survival, but also for better conditions. Amidst the shattered social fabric and cannibalistic figures, the pair optimistically moves forward, not having any evidence or reason to believe that they may find something greater on the other side. Their willingness and determination to reach the coast and build better lives for themselves is almost unwavering. They are guided by what remains of the American Dream and have an innate sense of hope determining their every move.

Being a post-apocalyptic child, he is pure and untainted by the evils of the former society. As such he does not know anything but the current condition of the world. His pure thoughts are hope for rebuilding society and returning to the values which imbued the

previous forms of the American Dream. “The son represents the historical potential for a just, equitable, and sustainable society, even if the conditions under which such as society could feasibly be established have passed, and even if that society – the ‘unimaginable future’ the son seems to anticipate – cannot be wholly conceived or visualized” (Jergenson/Джергенсон 2016: 131).

The Man continually entreats the Boy to keep “carrying the fire” (McCarthy/Маккарти 2006: 129). The fire may be interpreted in various ways. Most notably, in previous interpretations of the novel it has been seen as “the spark of civilization, or the life breath of god, or the promise of regeneration” (Kearney/Кирни 2014: 162). The fire is to be found within the Boy, much like a soul or a part of one’s identity. The American Dream has been defined in the previous chapter as an integral part of national identity, but the last remnant of it is the fire: only the Boy may recall this Dream – a vague reminiscence of an aeon now long gone.

The American Dream does not exist as a physical entity and as such cannot be precisely pinpointed and unanimously defined. But it does not need to be explicated and named in order for people to entertain this notion. To many people the American Dream is the most real and palpable aspect of their lives. The Man and the Boy hold on to the vision of the shore and the idea of the life that potentially awaits them. In this respect, the American Dream may be equated with the utopian drive⁴. Because the Boy was born away from late-capitalist consumer culture, he is able to entertain the notion of the American dream in its purest form – a genuine desire for improvement, moral and familial prosperity. The utopian impulse⁵ as an essential and

⁴ Many literary works were based on the notion of utopia prior to it being defined and named by Thomas Moore. In this view, the Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American Dream, but they would have understood the idea: after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but intuitively followed their beliefs in a better future. Therefore, American Dream is just as old as the utopian impulse itself.

⁵ Fredrik Jameson discusses the concept of utopian impulse in his work *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), wherein he distinguishes between the Utopian form as something that belongs to literature and the Utopian wish which may be compared to the concept Utopian

inherent aspect of humankind guides the Man and his son in all of their endeavors. In the novel, the Man's dreams are glimpses into the nostalgic idealization of the former world. In this case the utopian impulse is presented through its absence in their current surroundings. The stark contrast between the idyllic dreams and the devastating and nightmarish landscape provide even further insight into the necessity of hope for survival. Without the utopian desire, that is, the American Dream, there is no life.

Even in a bleak setting such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* we may find some remnants of what is recognized as the American Dream. Although it does not appear in its traditional and expected form, i.e. families searching for better opportunities and prosperity, it has not been completely eradicated. Dystopian and post-apocalyptic literary works provide readers with a perverse version of the American dream, one in which the progressive nature of the concept has been stifled and transformed into its antithesis. Instead of a society that celebrates hope and the tenacity of its inhabitants to fulfill their ambitions, in *The Road* we are presented with a seemingly dejected society which has given up any chance of salvation. The Boy represents what remains of the American Dream, a dream of betterment and belief in the ability to survive and prosper. So, is that the end of the road for the American Dream? The American dream has not disappeared but has been so drastically distorted by late-capitalist consumer culture that its current form is unrecognizable. McCarthy represents the downfall of a society which fell victim to this culture. The author of the paper introduced the idea that the dissipation of the American Dream, which is merely a realization of an innate utopian impulse, leads to the end of humanity. Utopian thinking is a central part of our identity and as such it is crucial to our survival.

impulse posited by Ernst Bloch. The Utopian wish/impulse is then defined as "governing everything future-oriented in life and culture" (Jameson/Джеймисън 2005: 2).

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