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PAGES: 1-11

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/614803>

Loyalty in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and *All the Pretty Horses*

B. Cercis TANRITANIR¹, Serdar TAKVA²

Abstract

Eco-fiction, plotting the connection between humanities and nature and nature itself, is a literary study aiming to form an awareness toward the natural world and its habitants. It covers either the humanistic impacts on nature or a nature without the interruption of human being. As it is impossible to assess human history without nature, literature centers upon how nature affects the presence of mankind. Additionally, it details what has occurred and could occur in the future. Cormac McCarthy, voicing the significant connection between the nature and human being, successfully demonstrates the combination of science fiction and fantasy literature through the novels he writes. He enables us to see what we cannot see and discover the new dimensions of naturalistic world under the surface. As the examples of eco-criticism, McCarthy's novels *The Road* and *All the Pretty Horses* thematize a post-apocalyptic world and a strong desire to pastoral life respectively. In *The Road*, we witness the persistent search and perseverance of a father and his son to be able to survive in a wracked world. Likewise, *All The Pretty Horses* provide readers with obstinate fidelity and determination to what is believed to be true for the figures reflected.

This study aims to uncover the common theme "loyalty" as one of the key elements to survive and reach an idealized life even though catastrophic events are presented.

Keywords: Eco-fiction, Cormac McCarthy, Loyalty, *The Road*, *All The Pretty Horses*, Post-apocalyptic, Pastoralism.

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Cormac MacCarthy'nin *Yol* ve *Tüm Güzel Atlar* Romanlarındaki Bağlılık Teması

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Özet

İnsanın doğa ve doğanın kendisiyle ilişkisini temalaştıran eko-kurgu doğal dünyaya ve habitatlarına karşı farkındalık uyandırmayı amaçlayan edebi bir çalışmadır. Bu çalışma ya insanoğlunun doğa üzerindeki etkisini ya da insanoğlunun etkisini olmadığı doğayı konu almaktadır. İnsanoğlunun tarihini doğa faktörü olmadan değerlendirmek imkansız olduğundan, edebiyat doğanın insanoğlunun varlığını nasıl etkilediğine odaklanır. Aynı zamanda, şu ana dek ne olduğu ve neler olabileceği ile de ilgilenir. Doğa ve insanoğlu arasındaki önemli bağı dillendiren Cormac McCarthy, yazmış olduğu romanlar aracılığıyla bilim kurgu ve fantezi edebiyatının sentezini başarılı bir şekilde sunmaktadır. Göremediklerimizi görmemizi ve yüzeysel gibi görünen doğal dünyanın farklı boyutlarını keşfetmemize olanak sağlar. Eko- eleştirinin örnekleri olan *Yol* ve *Tüm Güzel Atlar* romanları sırasıyla kıyamet sonrası bir dünyayı ve pastoral yaşama duyulan güçlü özlemi temalaştırmaktadır. *Yol* romanında baba ve oğlun yerle bir edilmiş dünyada hayatta kalmak için göstermiş oldukları ısrarlı araştırma ve kararlılığa tanık olmaktadır. Aynı şekilde *Tüm Güzel Atlar*, romanı okuyucularına romanda yer alan karakterler için ideal olan şeye karşı inatçı kararlılığı ve bağlılığı sunmaktadır.

Bu çalışma, katastrofik olayların meydana gelmesine rağmen, hayatta kalabilmenin ve ideal yaşama ulaşabilmenin önemli yapı taşlarından olan bağlılık temasını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eko-Kurgu, Cormac McCarthy, Bağlılık, *Yol*, *Tüm Güzel Atlar*, Kıyamet Sonrası, Pastoral Hayat.

Introduction

Being Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece, *The Road* contextualizes the struggle of two unnamed protagonists' efforts to survive in a barren, deserted and demolished world. The novel portrays the post-apocalyptic humanity whose values have been lost as a result of a couple of natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and storms. *The Road* covers a set of principles to be good guys and the father consistently teaches these principles described as; "don't eat people, don't steal, don't lie, keep your promises, help others and never give up". (Wielenberg, 2010: 4). While the father is teaching the principles, the child is responsible for following them in a world where the last remnants have lost morality. In the post-apocalyptic world almost all the natural resources- like clean water and electricity- and humanity do not exist anymore and the protagonists have very little with them in order to stay alive. Though not clear enough, the world has been devastated by a nuclear winter causing the father and his son to search for a better life in the coast of the south. During the journey to south, all their belongings are squeezed in a cart and they have nothing to do but to run on limited amount of food and drink in the places covered with gray snow. Just from the very beginning of the novel, McCarthy portrays how the world has been struck by several disasters. Though the cities they encounter remind the man of the life people once lived, they find no traces of former liveliness as described in the book like; "Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blinds wire strung from the blackened light poles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where road works lay abandoned". (p.4)

We are not exactly presented what has happened, yet we deduce that McCarthy whispers the fact that everything we own- including even our dreams- may go in a second and only the memories of the past go on surviving. Human beings from their birth to deaths seek the real beauty as well as humankind in the nature. It is clear that the nature reflected in *The Road* is full of catastrophes nonetheless, the nameless heroes are having a violent struggle so as to remain alive in the world in which people are predated each other. The father, threatened by the road agents and being wifeless, has only his son whose soul has been untouched by the brutality of the darkness. The novel, despite the gloomy view, depicts loyalty proving the light to survive.

Cormac McCarthy's other novel titled *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) is his sixth novel presenting the desire for a pastoral lifestyle. The novel is defined as "a modern day western" (Strausheim, 2011: 3) the chaos and violence

are replaced by order and governmental system on the other hand, the ranges once wild have been tamed and they are fenced by wires difficult to pass and wild wolves, buffaloes have disappeared. The roads are dominated by automobiles and it is nearly impossible to ride horses in the modernized American society. Cormac McCarthy portrays a sixteen year old boy as the victim of his divorced family and the changing environment. Because of his limited knowledge about the life, the boy tries to experience life and find his own way of life that is under the threat of industrialized society. In the beginning, as the readers, we witness the sale of the ranch by the boy's divorced family leading the boy to travel to south as there is not anything left to stay for. On horseback, John Grady and Rawlins set out for a new way of life and determine their own destiny. In his article- Naturalistic Determinism in the Border Fiction of Cormac McCarthy- Leitner views the young boy's decision as reactionary and a kind of defiance to the forces having the potential to determine his identity (2008:24). During their journey, they are accompanied by a young boy called Jimmy Blevins. The close relation between the human being and the nature is explicitly reflected since three boys face a lightning storm causing Blevins to strip off his clothes and abandon his horse. "Blevins was picking his way barefoot along the wash, carrying one boot. He looked up at John Grady. Where's your clothes at? said John Grady. Washed away. Your horse is gone (p.55).

In the village of Encantada, the stolen horse is found that's why, they attempt to steal the horse claimed to belong to someone else. After their attempt, they separate from Blevins and are pursued by a posse till they arrive at a ranch run by Don Hector. The events in *All the Pretty Horses* peak in the ranch as John and Rawlins find work and prove themselves having the intuitive skill of understanding horses. John Grady dedicates his life to horses and is given the responsibility of feeding them at the same time falls in love with Alejandra. Although he is warned by Alejandra's aunt- Alfonsa- about the invalidity of romance his infatuation results in a complete disillusionment since he is rejected in the end. John Grady and Rawlins are reported by Don Hector who learns the illegitimate affair and they are sent to prison where they have to fight in order to survive. Unfortunately, Blevins is executed for having killed at least one of the residents of the town. Having to protect themselves so as to live, Rawlins and Grady are exposed to violence during their imprisonment. Later on, about to lose their hopes of freedom, bribed by Alfonsa, the prison commander sets John Grady and Rawlins free. As soon as Grady is set free, he decides to go back to the ranch where he meets the foolishness of romantic dreams. Alejandra who has taken part in modern society declines Grady's proposal to set up a new life with him which symbolizes the rejection of pastoral life. Feeling depressed, John

insists on regaining the American horses back and gets them by taking the captain as a hostage. John's arrival to Texas results in another frustration as he discovers that their ranch has been sold and his best friend- Rawlins- is treating him as if he were a stranger. Like *The Road*, McCarthy fictionalizes *All the Pretty Horses* as open ended for John Grady rides aimlessly to west in the end. It is true that the novel provides the readers with pessimism, violence, unfulfilled romance and gunplay but among them we are given "Loyalty" as the hope to lead an idealized life.

Loyalty in *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy, describing the landscape hostile and disturbing by stating; "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world", (p.2) displays the struggle of the man, his and his son's hopeful journey towards south enduring irresistible hunger, freezing cold and relentless rain. All the conditions of the ruthless world devastated by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and floods are making the life harder for the man and his son". Not only is the landscape in the novel unbearably silent and motionless—no plant or animal, except for a dog, seems to have survived the nuclear holocaust" (Ibarrola, 2011: 3). The survivors are eating each other and only the fittest have the chance to cope with the harsh conditions to remain alive. In spite of the catastrophic presentation of the world, McCarthy thematizes "loyalty" as the milestone for the survival. *The Road*, being a post-apocalyptic novel, successfully underlines the commitment to moral values as the father and son never attempt to eat any kind of human as well as non-human beings. Unlike the road agents and other survivors, both man and son find it fairly immoral to eat other living creatures just to survive. They are well aware of the fact that murdering someone else is against what they really believe and humanistic values as respecting the living rights of others are more significant than starvation. Contrary to Strand's claim that the persistent repetition of the truth of their being "the good guys" blurs the readers' views that it is impossible for humanity to survive, (2012: 8) it is apparent that the boy as the source of light proves the survival of humanity even after the father's death. Additionally, the father views his son as a holy creature and is always fidel to his mission to protect the sacred child. The vague image of God's presence exists in the mind of the father yet, he does not give up reminding the existence of God both to himself and the boy. His belief in a sacred force protecting the "good guys" proves that God is still at work and the father is loyal to his mission as McCarthy describes it "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (p.39). At first glance, the man's role

could be evaluated as the responsibility of an affectionate father but McCarthy praises the father's continuous fidelity depicting the mother's weakness as she deserts both her husband and son for the fear that she will be raped and eaten. The risk of being killed and eaten does not dismay the man. What makes the one of the unprecedented ones is the bond originated from the love between the father and the son and *The Road* 'is a unique novel locating the basis for meaning in the father's love for his son and the love to the son is striking since it transcends the efforts to save the child ignoring the brutal conditions' (Schaub, 2009: 153). The mission that is thought to be given to the man is such an important one that it is emphasized indispensable in the novel and the father devotes himself to his mission regardless of the terribly portrayed circumstances. Whenever despair begins to predominate the child, his father reminds him of the word he has given. "I don't know what to do, Papa. I don't know what to do. Where will you be? It's okay. I don't know what to do. Shh. I'm right here. I won't leave you. You promise. Yes I promise" (p.58).

The man remembers his wife but at the same time we witness how he ignores his wife's tragic end as it may lead him to despair completely. Reality means giving up but so as to motivate the child for the sake of carrying the inner fire for the continuity of civilization, the man is not obsessed with what was experienced before. Although he has a great longing for his wife, he dedicates himself to his son which is a strict commitment to the goodness of the world and humanistic values. "Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up" (p.70). Although the cause of the disaster, transforming the earth into a grayish and at the same time barren desert, is thought to be climatic we conceive that it is human-created. In this disastrous world, the man- as the protector of the boy- wants his son to keep faith in the humanistic virtues. They have limited types of belongings one of the most important of which is a pistol. The pistol- though being ruinous- functions as a device to be loyal to individual morals. The monstrous people rape each other and then eat their corpses to survive. For this reason, the man warns his son to use the last bullet in order not to be raped or tortured. He recommends the boy not to hesitate to fire the gun and commit suicide should anyone intend to hurt him. By advising the usage of the gun when necessary, McCarthy points out the nobility of putting an end to one's life instead of being tortured and raped. "They sat on the embankment and waited. Nothing moved. He handed the pistol to the boy. You take it, Papa, the boy said. No. That's not the deal. Take it" (p. 93).

Loyalty in *All the Pretty Horses*

Cormac McCarthy shapes his novel based on the protagonist-John Grady's experiences both in Texas and Mexico. He is an American believing that each individual has the free will to decide upon his own fate. As a nature lover, Grady's life begins to change as soon as his grandfather is buried. He goes to his father for advice after the burial but his father replies; "I don't think there is much you can do here" (p.9). His father's reply is in fact ironic since it attributes to John Grady's helplessness as he has no options left. Grady given the old saddle, is not able to finish his high school education and feels that he has self-control over his life. Losing his family, home and the ranch, John Grady sets about his journey leaving the painful extinction of American pastoralism behind. Despite his young age, he longs for an idealized rural life and hopes to find it in another country. He wants to own a ranch in Mexico where he believes the old way of life still continues and not distorted by modern life.

According to Bourne, John Grady, enthusiastically riding his horse and accompanied by Rawlins, is making a great effort to return to "mystical wild landscape" (2009:120) by traveling to south. John Grady is the most striking figure keeping his loyalty to what he really believes to be true. In all phases of his life and journey, we observe his loyalty to his values despite the obstacles he comes across. Firstly, as Grady and Rawlins are on their way to Mexico, they coincide with another boy called Jimmy Blevins. At first glance, Blevins does not arouse a sense of reliability and Rawlins shows his reaction by not taking what he says into consideration in the very beginning of their coincidental meeting. "You aint said what your all's names was, he said. You aint never asked. That aint how I was raised, said Blevins. Rawlins stared at him bleakly and turned away" (p.35). Blevins is a new companion terrified of a lightning, concealing in a ditch and losing his horse and rifle. Despite the fact that it is the first time they have encountered John Grady does not leave him alone and persistently does whatever he can to help him find his horse. John Grady is not sure of Blevins' friendship nevertheless, he cooperates with Rawlins and steals the horse back even though it causes his imprisonment in the future. As an indication of old and rural life and opposition to modern life, neither Grady nor Rawlins intends to leave each other and McCarthy puts forward this togetherness and strong bond by providing his readers with the conversation between Grady and Rawlins after their separation from Blevins.

What if it was you? It aint me. What if it was? Rawlins twisted the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and plucked a match from his pocket and popped it alight with his thumbnail. He looked at John Grady. I wouldn't leave you and you wouldn't leave me. That aint no argument. (p.61)

As a Bildungsroman, the protagonist- John Grady- heads out into the forests, deserts travels down the rivers on horseback to find wilderness with his friend Rawlins. During his journey, John and Rawlins pursue all their merits. As they promised one another, even during their imprisonment they do not abandon each other. Even though Rawlins had the chance to escape from the prison, he did not run off the jail and their dependence to the friendship outweighed freedom. The relation between the two young boys is beyond an ordinary one and they prefer suffering instead of leading a free life.

Rawlins nodded. I could of run off from where they had me. It was just a hospital ward. Why didn't you? I don't know. You think I was dumb not to of? I don't know. Yeah. Maybe. What would you of done? I wouldn't of left you. Yeah I know you wouldn't. That don't mean it aint dumb. (p.154)

Besides, John Grady employed by Don Hector to care the horses, form a unique relation with the horses at the ranch which refers to his eagerness to wild life. He has a developed talent to fulfill his duties in the ranch. Generally speaking, John exhibits heroic features for his horsemanship, physical endurance to pain and ability to doctor himself when he is injured. Moreover, he is appreciated and dignified for his insistence to get their horses back taking the captain as a hostage in Encantada and turning into a criminal from an innocent boy. John Grady reclaims the American horses and rejects to leave Mexico without them. The horses from the start of the novel symbolize the young boy's ever -lasting love to pastoral life and strong connection to wildness in which he tries to find his real personality. The protagonist risks his life once more when he demands the horses, belonging to him and Rawlins, but without any hesitation he strives for his virtues and brotherhood whose value cannot be questioned.

Rawlins' horse was in a mud barn in the lot behind the house. He spoke to it and it lifted its head at his voice and nickered at him. He told the charro to get a bridle and he stood holding the pistol while the charro bridled the horse and then he took the reins from him. He asked him where the other horses were. He stood looking down. John Grady told him that he had no more patience and no more time and that the captain was a dead man anyway but that he could still save himself. He told them that Blevins was his brother and he'd taken a bloodoath not to return to his father without the captain's head. (p.185)

Eco-criticism as Baratta states; is benefitted by science fiction and fantasy and eco-critical study enables individuals to reevaluate the nature-human relation (2011:3). John, escaping from the modernized American society, tries to construct a new life based on uncontaminated rural life. The efforts of Grady to reform his identity is shaped by the nature itself. The effect on the hero of the novel is visible throughout the whole novel and John Grady - as a devoted boy to his ambitions- adheres to his goals and takes Rawlins' horse to him. It is a fact that Grady has been unable to achieve the goal of leading a rural life but the horses, symbolizing his dream of creating pastoral ranch life, are indispensable for him. Grady was on the verge of being killed during his attempt to get the horses back but he is portrayed such a dedicated boy that he would rather have lost his life than given up his oath both to himself and his friend. Hoping to find Rawlins as decisive as he was before to build a natural life, Grady submits his horse and proves how a boy despite his young age can devote himself to his dreams. The strong formation of identity results from his travel through distances and Strausheim claims that 'journeys can form the basis of an identity' (2011:1).

He walked around him to get him in the light and looked at him as if he were something rare. I figured you might want your old horse back, said John Grady. I can't believe it. You got Junior with you? He's standing down yonder at the barn. Sum buck, said Rawlins. I can't believe it. Sum Buck. (p.208)

Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy, who has tempted his readers with a story of a father and son in a post-apocalyptic world and a young boy who is able to live the life of his choice respectively, is a visionary American novelist fictionalizing the relation between nature and humanity and the ways to have a better understanding of seeing the consequences of destruction both on the natural world and humanity. In his eco-critical studies focusing on reestablishing the connection between the reader and the natural world, McCarthy successfully fulfills the goals of highlighting the importance of science fiction and fantasy. As well. He is well aware of the fact that environmental writing and eco-critical texts should be brought together with science fiction in order to raise a new consciousness and a new thought. Accepted as science fiction works, both *The Road* and *All the Pretty Horses* introduce us new worlds we are not familiar with. Although the worlds given are fantasized, the contents of the novels draw inspiration from the real world and the reality surrounding us. That's why, what we are presented is not utopic and new thoughts are plotted in the works. *The Road* exemplifying the post-apocalyptic life handles the continuous struggle of a father and son to find

more livable place thought to be in south. Though surrounded by road agents, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, rains and gray ashes, the man and the boy do not lose their values and keep on being loyal to them. Especially the man is stick to the humanistic virtues by not murdering anyone and educating his son despite the disastrous environmental conditions. Believing to the rebirth of humanity, they never eat anyone, try to help people and consider death in case of being raped. Like *The Road*, *All the Pretty Horses* tackles the hopeful search of a sixteen year old boy for a more livable life. The opening scene involves the protagonist's watching a train characterizing the industrial invasion of pastoral life. Losing the ranch inherited by his grandfather and having a divorced family, John Grady sets off to have an idealized pastoral life in south. John Grady like the man and the son in *The Road* is pretty loyal to what he believes to be true. He sticks to his humanistic values by not deserting his friends alone and keeping his oath to regain what he possesses. He supports Blevins in his efforts to get his horse back, dedicates himself to his work as a horse tamer to regain his dreams. At the end of the novel, John loses the ranch, his lover and his father. Moreover, he is estranged from his former friend Rawlins and witnesses Blevins' murder. Throughout the novel, despite all the disasters he experiences, ranging from killing to losing his belief in romance, the boy never quits his morals and ideals. John is portrayed as a mature man in the end riding aimlessly but he is still loyal to his ambition to have a pastoral life. Both novels do not provide us with a precise ending and our curiosity is not satisfied as the boy in *The Road* meets a new family and John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* heads west alone but in both cases we are still in the opinion that their loyalties to their values have not changed. That is, the father and son and John Grady are the figures representing fidelity to their humanistic dignities. McCarthy fosters us witness the individualistic features of the figures and their faithfulness to humanitarian facts in the worlds in which there is blood, violence and blasted romance.

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