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Hell On Earth: A Modern Day Inferno in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Hell On Earth: A Modern Day *Inferno* in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

A Thesis

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in
English

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Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Dante's the *Inferno* contain textual and thematic comparisons. While the *Inferno* creates a world that exhibits the worst fears of the medieval Catholic subconscious of Dante's time, *The Road* paints a world of the darkest fears of the current American subconscious. Both texts reflect a critical dystopia that speculates on human spirituality and offers a critique of society through a tour of sin and suffering in a desolate setting.

Keywords: McCarthy, Cormac; Dante; *The Road*; *Inferno*; hell; apocalypse; sin; dystopia; speculative fiction;

INTRODUCTION

Written in the early fourteenth century, Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* follows Dante's journey through hell in a desolate, fiery and icy landscape, where he encounters every level of sin in order to reach purgatory and paradise. Written in 2006, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* tells the story of a nameless man and his son's tour through a post-apocalyptic, ashen, American landscape, where they struggle against freezing temperatures and savage survivors to reach the coast before winter. *The Road* opens, "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him" (3). Canto one of the *Inferno* begins, "In the middle of the journey of our life I came / to myself within a dark wood where the straight / way was lost" (1-3). Despite the authors' vast differences of time and place, the comparisons between the opening lines of these texts, which will be further explicated below, reveal similarities between the texts that link them both textually and thematically. While the *Inferno* creates a world that exhibits the worst fears of the medieval Catholic subconscious of Dante's time, *The Road* paints a world of the darkest fears of the current American subconscious. The dark narratives follow the conventions of a dystopia, which is a negative version of a utopia. By reworking the tropes of the *Inferno* of sin, suffering, and desolation, McCarthy creates a dystopia from chaos that addresses the significance of the historical context of our time by illustrating the qualms of society, especially within the American subconscious, brought on by the September 11th attacks, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and the environmental crisis. These events challenged the American idea that John Cant calls the "Myth of American Exceptionalism" by revealing weaknesses in the country's national security—one reason why

The Road resonates with so many readers and critics.¹ The world McCarthy creates offers “a detailed and pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives,” which contradicts the American idea that its power is invincible, its land is fertile, and its ideals are infallible (Moylan 147). Out of an exploration of the afterlife, Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* also creates an alternate world that embodies the fears of human nature, which explains why the work remains influential and relevant. Both works are alike in their timeless, universal appeal because they examine human nature and society within a set of imagined extremes.

Although the two works were produced seven centuries apart, several themes of the *Inferno* echo in McCarthy’s exploration of post-apocalyptic American dystopia. Themes *The Road* borrows from the *Inferno* include an “everyman” protagonist, a guidance relationship, a desolate setting, and encounters with sin and suffering. These shared themes develop a modern understanding of the *Inferno* and *The Road* as journeys through physical and spiritual darkness; and readers also trek the journeys. The universal points of view reflected in the use of “everyman” protagonists that Dante and McCarthy employ also allow for this universal reading of the *Inferno* and *The Road*. The journey of the characters and readers is further developed by the physical and philosophical contributions of a guide in both texts: Virgil in the *Inferno* and “the man” in *The Road*. McCarthy represents society in crisis mode. Readers glimpse the darkest corners of human nature, such as selfishness and violence, as well as the darkest social practices, such as slavery and gangs, that bubble to the surface in *The Road*’s post-apocalyptic scenario.

Dante reveals the deepest sins of the human race by projecting an illustration of the

¹ American Exceptionalism purports that, due to America’s unique historical and political origins of immigration and democracy, American ideals make it the land of opportunity for anyone who works hard. McCarthy illustrates in *The Road* that even the American human heart is innately tainted—John Locke’s *tabula rasa* does not exist—and to glorify the purity of America is to mythologize a nation’s history (Cant 7).

consequences of the afterlife. Sin and suffering—the harsh consequences of crisis and Judgment Day—reveal the potential of imminent disaster and provoke a critique of the present. The desolate settings of the *Inferno* and *The Road* characterize the fears of this imminence by making use of the pathetic fallacy, because the landscapes reflect the depravity of humanity. These narrative tropes, combined with the critical distance afforded by an escape from reality, allow for rich readings of both texts that extend beyond religion and gory journeys toward a significant commentary on the human race. Dante uses a common religious narrative and a tour of historical figures to expose the corruption of the human spirit and of the church; and McCarthy uses a travel narrative and an apocalyptic crisis to expose the violent underside of human nature and to dispel the American myth that the world has sympathy for humans.

As works in which a fantasy world serves as social commentary, the *Inferno* and *The Road* might be considered, among other genres, speculative fiction. Dante paints a portrait of the afterlife, which was an unrealized—but potential—reality of his living audience. McCarthy paints the portrait of global destruction, which is an unrealized, but potential reality. The rational renderings of fantasy in both works reflect the premise of speculative fiction and critical dystopia, which gives readers an opportunity to explore the consequences of humanity's worst nightmares with a critical eye. *The Road's* futuristic look at the world criticises the present state of the world through its comparison with the new one McCarthy invents. This contrast is a convention of critical dystopia and speculative fiction. And Dante allows readers to reflect on social and personal sins by presenting a social structure in the afterlife. While most scholars would not place Dante's epic poem into the speculative fiction category, his transportation into the religious afterlife offers the same critical opportunity for comparison with the present as speculative fiction. The critical and popular acclaim for *The Road*, which has surpassed that of

McCarthy's other nine novels and won the author his first Pulitzer Prize, may be owing to the futuristic, fantasy element he experiments with for the first time. He retains his terse, unsentimental prose while tackling the sprawling issues of human nature and society.

As speculative fiction, McCarthy's *The Road* portrays a classic dystopia through its tour of sin, suffering, and desolation by reworking Dante's map of hell and creating one for McCarthy's time. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan argue in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* that a "dystopian tendency developed within science fiction and this resulted in the 'new maps of hell,'" a definition that reworks Dante's map of hell in the *Inferno*. Baccolini and Moylan's definition of dystopia applies to McCarthy and Dante:

The dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside. (Baccolini 1-2)

The use of a "prophetic vehicle" to reveal existential questions of our age fits John Cant's description of *The Road* as the achievement of "A Grand Narrative of Western Culture" and explains the purposes of the novel's cryptic premise to address nature's mortality and humanity's spirituality.

In presenting the conditions of the world and humanity, the *Inferno* and *The Road* share a sense of hope within a seemingly hopeless setting, which reflects a convention of dystopias. Dystopia, a negative version of a utopia, still contains hope because the narrative's gloomy outlook on society implies social criticism in the form of a warning, which offers the possibility for reform of the dystopic order (Baccolini 7). A major difference between the *Inferno* and *The Road* is that McCarthy's novel lacks the second two movements of *La Divina Comedia*, wherein

the path to paradise is made evident. Dante's section on hell ends with an uplifting promise of heaven that justifies the character's harsh trek:

...The Leader

And I entered on that hidden road to return into
The bright world, and without caring to have any
rest we climbed up, he first and I second, so far
that I saw through a round opening some of the
fair things that Heaven bears; and thence we came
forth to see again the stars. (34.115-120)

In *The Road*, however, there is no advancement to purgatory or paradise. Dante's journey through hell is just the start of his hopeful journey, but McCarthy's journey through hell on earth ends without a clear resolution. Perhaps it is easier to resolve conflicts in a religious afterlife based on common beliefs of hell, purgatory, and paradise than to resolve the worst-case scenario of life on earth without certain knowledge that afterlife even exists. The glimmer of hope without a clear resolution—like that of the *Inferno*—offers a richly ambiguous reading of *The Road*.

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND RECEPTION

Dante's *La Divina Comedia* has arguably influenced more literature and arts than any other Western text other than the Bible. Dante wrote the poem after his opposition to Pope Boniface VIII caused papal authorities to force him into exile from Florence rather than be burned at the stake for crimes he did not commit. His disillusion with the Catholic church undoubtedly influenced *La Divina Comedia*, and his bold decision to write it in the vernacular, Italian, instead of in Latin made the poem accessible to the public. His economy of punishment and suffering tends to forgive those base impulses like lust and even murder more than the worst

circles of hell that punish human deception such as fraud and betrayal. Like McCarthy, Dante represents that humans' innate violence and lust as derived from animal impulses, so he tolerates sins of this nature more so than calculated transgressions. For example, in Canto 19, Dante punishes Pope Nicholas III in The Eighth Circle of Hell for fraud by burying his head facedown in a hole with flames burning the soles of his feet, because he committed simony, which is the exchange of payment for holy offices of the church. Without sympathy, a heated Dante inquires of the pope, "Pray tell / me now; how much treasure did our Lord require / of Saint Peter before He gave the keys into this charge?" (19.80-83). This emphasizes his spite for the pope's sin of personal greed and deliberate corruption beneath the facade of serving God. When Dante adds, "Thou art / rightly punished...for your avarice / afflicts the world, trampling on the good and exalting / the wicked," he expresses his ideas about justice (19.86-93). Unlike Dante's personal experience of unwarranted exile, the poet's imagined world creates a moral justice system wherein punishments more appropriately match the crimes as he sees fit. This alternative justice system establishes Dante's moral standards while expressing a critique of church corruption. While the *La Divina Commedia* in its entirety is an allegory of a spiritual journey toward salvation, the *Inferno* creates a world to illustrate and reject sin, specifically. By creating a new world from his tour of hell, Dante expresses some of the worst fears of the standard, medieval idea of hell, but he maintains his individual, poetic voice. By inclusion of his idols, Virgil and Beatrice, as moral guides and accessible literary and papal figures, Dante demonstrates his moral justice system.

Regardless of Dante's intentions, however, the world he creates in the *Inferno* of perpetual sin, suffering, and desolation—his rendition of hell—has been reinterpreted at many moments in history according to personal beliefs and historical context. This cultural relativity of

La Divina Commedia has contributed to claims that it is the most influential and greatest work of Italian literature. For example, many recent productions of the *Inferno* have been adapted for the stage, such as Texas director Mark-Brian Sonna's *Dante: Inferno*, which took the stage in 2009. *The Los Angeles Times* blog reviewed an animated film in February of 2010 titled *Dante's Inferno* under the headline, "Dante's Inferno' and the rings of pop culture," and the film is actually derived from a video game (Boucher). The continued interest in Dante's rendering of hell suggests humanity's fixation with his themes of death (and life), the depravity and redemption of human nature, and the ability for an afterlife narrative to inspire a social critique of the present.

McCarthy reasserts the fruitful tropes of the *Inferno* in *The Road*, but reworks them to implicitly criticize contemporary society. McCarthy's reclusive lifestyle and reluctance to give interviews veil his intentions in *The Road*; however, its reception indicates its influence. Both the press and academia have received it positively, and it has sold over one million copies (Cant 266). Cant describes how *The Road*'s efforts to address basic philosophical questions as well as McCarthy's bold achievement of writing a "grand narrative of Western culture" have won over all types of audiences. Cant explains that McCarthy may have been attempting to achieve "the grand narrative," but that he develops it within "its broader cultural context," and "identif[ies] it as a product of changing historical circumstances" (266).

Although the novel does not concern itself with the cause of the crisis that left the landscape in *The Road* a wasteland, it implies that humans have something to do with it. The only details of the actual "event" McCarthy reveals appear in a glimpse into the man's memory:

The clock's stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? [his late wife] said.

He didn't answer. He went into the bathroom and threw a lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass (52).

The cryptic episode leaves readers to contemplate—not one—but *every* option of world- and self-destruction. Like the sinners who create their hell in Dante, Americans questioned how September 11th came to happen. Americans' reaction of "incomprehension" after the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Mecca of American capitalist vitality, clearly expresses the sharp suddenness of a sense of national mortality. Americans not only contemplated mass destruction at the hands of Al-Qaida from their newly vulnerable "City upon a Hill," but also wondered what other unsuspecting threats to their security might exist. In a country that fights an invisible enemy of terror, publicly proclaims a slew of countries as the "axis of evil," and must defend itself against vague weapons as undetectable as a white powder, it is feasible that Americans in 2006 feared human-inflicted destruction of the U.S., if not the whole world.²

After the Twin Towers were hit, Americans questioned their security within U.S. borders, and McCarthy's novel paints a picture of the apex of that fear. Serious debate about America's entrance into Iraq began to stir when it was confirmed in May 2005 that Weapons of Mass Destruction were never found. The questionable motivations for invading Iraq only further dispelled the Myth of American Exceptionalism once the initial, national unity harnessed by the September 11th attacks began to fade. Evidence of a breach in a feeling of national security occurred when air travel, a powerful sign of American productivity and normalcy, was interrupted. Cant says McCarthy probably intended to write a grand narrative that addressed a broader cultural context, and America's crisis at the time of *The Road*'s publication, involving

² Myers, Steven Lee. "Breaking World Iraq." *The New York Times*. 3/16/2010.

terrorism attacks, entrance into the much-disputed Iraq War, as well as widespread conversations on global warming, supports this claim.

Although the image of the wasteland is one McCarthy often employed in his previous novels, it is “reasserted more powerfully than ever before” in *The Road*, perhaps to suggest a human-caused catastrophe (Cant 269). The wasteland, constantly described through images of ash, death, and erosion of once-familiar things, appears early in the text: “The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day” (12). *The Road*’s reference to some version of a nuclear holocaust offers a startling realization in its preservation of some humans, including the protagonists. Just as Dante feels unworthy in his exclusive quest of the underworld, the man must wonder why he roams the earth while animals and even nature have been wiped out. The human beings’ susceptibility to radiation or other effects of the “event” that killed insects, rodents, and shrubs, might cause them to contemplate why the universe essentially euthanized animals and most of nature at the “end of the world” but left man to wander in the absence of any provisional necessities. According to Cant, this also contradicts the Myth of American Exceptionalism because it points to the insignificance of the human/American lives of the protagonists (Cant 269). If the elusive event killed off most people and most creatures, those who were spared might not only feel survivors’ guilt, but they may paradoxically feel cosmically insignificant and powerless, which illustrates a common McCarthy theme.

Without a clear-cut explanation of the event, readers at the time of publication probably considered environmental destruction brought on by humans to be one possible cause. This accusation may be especially germane to Americans, who consume 25 percent of the world’s

energy, use three times as much water per capita, produce five times more daily waste than the average of poor countries, yet constitute only 5 percent of the world's population (Donnelly). Environmental activist and columnist for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, George Monbiot, called *The Road* "the most important environmental book ever written" in his 2007 review of the novel (29). Monbiot also stated in a column in October of 2006 that he believed the issue of climate change was the "moral question of the 21st century" (29). Monbiot infers that much of *The Road*'s imagery suggests the shrinking of the biosphere. For example, the narrator relays a memory of the man from before the novel's action but after the mysterious event, wherein he hears birds for the last time, "their half-muted crankings miles above where they circled the earth as senselessly as insects trooping the rim of a bowl" (53). He asserts that McCarthy makes no claim that this will occur if (and perhaps, when) the biosphere shrinks, "but merely speculates about the consequences" (29). He later concludes that if the "people of the rich world" fail to practice stewardship of the planet due to a "hardening of interest" and "shutting down of concern," which is reflected in McCarthy's man's collapse of core beliefs as his journey worsens, the world need not to wait around for McCarthy's haunting vision to materialize before realizing the peril of civilization. This popular British columnist demonstrates the global environmental concern of *The Road* outside of the United States as well.

Several cultural contexts fresh on the minds of readers in 2006 other than environmental concerns can explain why the novel, which attempts to fill such a large scope, attracted mainstream audiences despite its sparse language, escalating gore, and dense structure. Fears of mounting crisis—embodied by Hurricane Katrina, which nearly wiped out New Orleans—prepared the world for *The Road*'s direct, unforgiving prose and uncomfortable, mind-bending subject matter. The large scope that McCarthy tackles by creating a world out of a mysterious

apocalypse matches the scope that Dante achieved in the 1300s. McCarthy's gaze into the future warns readers to examine the cost of our culture, regardless of whether he expects them to view *The Road* as a realistic prophecy or merely a bare-bones allegory for the human experience on earth. Similarly, Dante looks into the future of life after death to warn his audience of the consequences of all types of sin on earth, while also presenting an allegory of the human journey toward Christian salvation.

TEXTUAL COMPARISONS

Beyond the similarly universal scope that Dante and McCarthy achieve in the *Inferno* and *The Road*, close readings of certain passages highlight striking similarities of imagery and language and foreshadow dark struggles of the subsequent journeys. *The Road* opens with a dream that directly alludes to the first canto in the *Inferno*, which sets a frame for the rest of *The Road's* hellish journey. As previously mentioned, *The Road* opens: "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him" (3). Canto one of the *Inferno* begins: "In the middle of the journey of our life I came / to myself within a dark wood where the straight / way was lost" (1-3). Both narratives begin in dark woods, creating an ominous tone set within an antagonistic natural world, which illustrates another construct of dystopia. "When he woke..." sets up the description of the man's dream, and "I came / to myself" suggests Dante's entrance into a dream narrative, which will continue throughout *La Divina Commedia*. Early dreams haunt both texts, whose versions of an alternate world tread the boundary between reality and fantasy.

The man's son is introduced in the first sentence of *The Road* when the man touches the child sleeping beside him, suggesting he travels the road with a companion. Dante's use of the pronoun "our" invokes "we" and engages the reader, and it also suggests the man is not alone in

the narrative. The tender mention of the child in *The Road* establishes an intimacy between the man and the reader like that which Dante's pronouns establish with his audience. The child belongs to the man, suggesting he is middle-aged, like Dante, when his journey begins. As middle-aged characters, the man and Dante enter the narratives with some already-established wisdom, but they also have room for growth. This perspective foreshadows a midlife-changing journey—not an adventure of inspired youth—that reflects the sobering worlds these men are about to enter. The vagueness of their ages, though, also introduces the complex role that time plays in both works and the ambiguity of past, present, and future. McCarthy's title and Dante's mention of "the way" play on the ubiquitous conceit of a road in both texts. The roads serve as allegories for an epic journey of the body and soul, and a road—with its vague certainty of having a beginning and end—invokes the concept of inescapable, unpredictable, and even arbitrary mortality. Whether or not McCarthy intentionally mirrors the opening scene of the *Inferno*, the closely connected language and imagery of these early introductions connote similar promises of a dark, arduous journey for both the protagonists and the reader that bends reality and uncovers hard truths about society and human nature. Further intertextuality appears later in the beginning of both works.

The first few pages of *The Road* reveal more allusions to Canto 1 of the *Inferno* that extend the foreshadowing mentioned above and introduce existential themes that appear in both texts. Both passages begin with the protagonists awakened from a dream before the dream is described. The man in *The Road* dreams of a beast that swings his head and then suddenly runs back into the cave, leaving the man unharmed. Although the "restless" beasts of Dante's dream may frighten him—he also remains unharmed (47). This mounting threat, accompanying fear, and subsequent (temporary) relief sets up a pattern that both Dante and the man continue to

repeat. In the face of desolate landscapes, dangerous brushes with sinners or “bad guys,” and the witnessing of suffering, Dante and the man struggle to maintain courage to continue on the road. Dante struggles with salvation and the man struggles with survival. But Dante and the man must not give up; because a courageous heart is the only defense people have against their own human nature and the worlds in which Dante and the man find themselves. Both anomalous settings include dense woods, hills, and valleys, which dispel any Utopian or romantic notions of the pastoral tradition. The dream in *The Road* contains a black, “ancient lake,” and in Canto 1, Dante refers to how fear grew overnight in “the lake of [his] heart” (1.3; 16). Water serves as a feminine symbol of nature’s fertility, according to Cant, and this relates ironically to both references (254). McCarthy’s black lake mocks the idea of nature providing for humans and Dante’s lake grows fertile with fear. Just as McCarthy’s man “glasses the *valley* below” with binoculars to find dead trees and barren land, Dante thoughtfully “turned back to look again at the pass which never yet let any go alive” when he reaches the end of a valley (4, my emphasis; 1.20-22). This early reference to looking toward the future and to the past echoes the conflict in both texts between the past, present, and future.

The *Inferno* reveals the conflict of time with its presence of historical figures and literary allusions, while *The Road* reveals memories of the past, self-preservation in the present, and uncertainty about the future. This conflict is best illustrated when the man confides in his son after they come across a corpse in a doorway, “You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget” (12). Both opening scenes follow the characters descending downward—to hell for Dante and to the south for the man and boy. And each reveals language and symbols that subtly foreshadow a barren, antagonistic journey whose circumstances are unknown.

In addition, McCarthy offers a culturally critical interpretation of the man's aforementioned dream, by employing a specialized use of animals to suggest humanity's desire to control nature.³ In *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy*, Wallis R. Sanborn looks at McCarthy's use of animals in each of his works and makes suggestions about man's relationship to nature based on the types of animals that appear. *The Road* contains the fewest animals of all his works, but their absence speaks to Sanborn's concept. Animals exist, like humans, in McCarthy's world of biological determinism, with the wildest animals as the most virile and least likely to be tamed, and domesticated animals the most likely to die.⁴ McCarthy describes the beast in the man's dream in *The Road* as wild:

And on the far shore a *creature* that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. *Crouching* there pale and *naked* and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It *swung its head from side to side* and then gave out a *low moan* and turned and *lurched* away and *loped* soundlessly into the dark (3-4, my emphasis).

³ Critics Alex Hunt and Martin M. Jacobsen offer another interpretation of the dream worth noting. They claim it alludes to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and "Simile of the Sun." They suggest the dream's use of light and darkness, man's presence of the cave, and blindness of the beast alludes to the "fundamental need for illumination beyond human perception" (156). They assert that the dream foreshadows a loss of wisdom and hope because the beast runs from the light and in the closing scene and because the father dies near a cave in the end. However, Sanborn's analysis of McCarthy's use of animals reveals a more complex and culturally significant reading.

⁴ "Biological determinism refers to events that are casually determined by natural laws, which are, themselves, determined by a combination of environment and genetics; animals—genetic products—of all types, which endlessly struggle for survival, are victims of environmental forces beyond their control or understanding" (Sanborn 3).

The human treatment of animals demonstrates man's absolute desire to control the natural world, according to Sanborn (2). Humans desire to kill animals they cannot tame, "individually, collectively, or cumulatively," because, universally, McCarthy's characters "possess a need to control the fauna—in the air, on land, or in the water—that exists in the natural world" (Sanborn 2). The ambiguous, bizarrely translucent wild creature from the man's dream serves as a clear omen from the first page of novel that humanity has gone too far in its control and destruction of nature—because the wild animal is a ghost. This omen suggests that humans deserve the blame for the apocalypse in their arrogant effort to control the natural world. The opaque, white eyes, "alabaster bones," transparent body, and glass scull describe ghostly qualities. The low moan expresses lament, as if this creature despairs for lost lives of all animals. And the use of the word "creature" and vague description of the species allow for it to signify an animal archetype.

Sanborn's assertion that the humans kill animals individually, cumulatively, or collectively is significant in its application to the man's dream in *The Road*. When the creature moans and "lopes soundlessly into the dark," he does not seem to attempt to condemn the man and the boy who face him on the other side of the black lake. The protagonists serve as witnesses to the suffering of this archetypical animal-ghost, a role they repeat, so the dream foreshadows further scenes of suffering. The mystical dream that laments the destruction of the natural world at the hand of humans lends a more vital significance to the man's and boy's role as bearers of truth. As witness to the truth of the world's past suffering, they must "carry the fire," (the father and son's phrase they use to renew their faith in humanity and sustain their vitality on the road). Interpreting the creature in the man's dream as a ghost indicates humanity's crimes against the natural world; and although Dante uses animals differently—to establish the superiority of

humans, both texts produce fictional versions of animals to set up a contrast between human beings and animals to judge humanity.

Dante's use of animals in the *Inferno's* Canto 1, lines thirty through forty-nine, carries special significance to the plot of *The Road* because they describe the man's emotional struggle with losing hope when he encounters the animalistic savages that Dante also toils with in hell. Dante's failed attempt to find comfort in the concept of time during his encounter with the beast, which represents the loss of human order, illustrates the hopelessness in hell.

The time was the beginning of the morning and
The sun was mounting with those stars which were
With it when the Divine Love first set in motion
Those fair things, so that the hour of the day and
The sweet season moved me to good hope of escape
From that beast with the gay skin; but, even so,
I was put in fear by the sight of a lion..." (1.30-36)

Dante's reference to the beginning of time "when the Divine love first set in motion," relates to *The Road* because, despite time's irrelevancy, the man also searches for comfort in time: "The man thought he was in October but wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years" (Dante 30-35, McCarthy 4). Although he does not keep a calendar, McCarthy's man still thinks about what month he is in. He harkens to time, despite its irrelevance, because like Dante, he is comforted by order, giving hope of a controlled environment with systems of moral justice. In both passages the protagonists look to time for solace, but it fails them because in Dante's afterlife and McCarthy's dystopia, time carries no control, thus no comfort. The made-made construction

of time offers Dante and the man a comforting sense of order, because their journeys in hell are ruled by chaos, represented by the lion in the above passage.

The hunger and cravings of the lion and she-wolf in Canto 1 offer a gloomy glimpse into the cannibals that threaten the man and boy's physical and mental will to survive in *The Road*. Dante captures the father's erratic struggle with the will to survive near the end of the passage in question:

...I lost hope of the ascent; and like one who
rejoices in his gains and when the time comes that
makes him a loser has all his thoughts turned to
sadness and lamentation, such did the restless beast
make me... (1.1-49)

Dante's terror at the "wretchedness" of the she-wolf's hunger inspires the "heaviness" that causes him to lose hope. This fear and disgust, combined with sadness and lamentation, characterize the man's attitude when he encounters fellow survivors who have turned to murder, rape and cannibalism for survival, or when he meets suffering slaves on the road that shake his faith in human nature and thus his will to continue. By establishing a frame through the man's dream as an allusion to Canto 1 of Dante's spiritual journey in the *Inferno*, *The Road* takes its readers on a modern day hellish journey set in American ruins. An allusion to Canto 1 of the *Inferno* in *The Road's* opening pages also places it in a strange limbo between reality and a dream that suggests readers should suspend their disbelief and prepare for a daunting and fearful journey.

APPLICATION OF DANTE'S NARRATIVE TROPES

As the travelers on this journey, the protagonists are both given archetypical identities. As Lawrence Baldassaro suggests, the poet's use of his name in his poem creates a fictional persona that readers can universalize. Because McCarthy calls his protagonists "the man" and "the boy," *The Road* also becomes "...not only the story of the journey of one man, but also the potential story of every man who makes the journey through life" (Baldassaro 64). The "everyman" pilgrim-persona that Dante and McCarthy create points to man's common decent and mortal capacity. Baldassaro argues that the presence of original sin is apparent in Dante and thus, reveals that he is vulnerable to sin. This is a helpful insight into the McCarthy's character because his fight to survive for his son and retain faith in human nature would lose some of its quiet valor had the father never been tempted to give up. All of the father's adamant preaching to his son about not "giving up" is made more poignant when he has moments of weakness when he would rather be dead. And the man's questionable faith in God is shattered for a moment, when the father feels a gang might harm his son and thinks, "Curse God and die" (114).

Although the reader and the protagonists might find it easier to view the cannibals and thieves as abject and unlike the man and the boy, this theme of shared humanity complicates the villains. These cannibals have been presented with the apocalypse and are pushed to the edge of desperation. McCarthy tests the moral limits of his characters, because the villains' desperation prevents them from being considered supernaturally evil or other. They are merely corrupted, like the sinners of the *Inferno*, which makes sin more threatening and man more vulnerable. After the man and boy find a basement of naked prisoners of cannibals, the boy is brought to tears days later in fear of his vulnerability to sin: "We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?" (128). The father must reassure the boy that they will never eat anyone, and the boy remarks,

“Because we’re the good guys” (129). The son invents this term “good guys” to separate himself from the cannibals, or “bad guys,” because accepting that they are the same proves too much to bear. The use of prototypical protagonists in Dante’s *Commeda* and McCarthy’s *The Road* highlights the common humanity that the protagonists share with both the sinners and cannibals.

Another distinguishing theme both works’ protagonists share is the nature of the relationship they foster with their traveling companion. The man travels with the boy, and Dante travels with Virgil. The man’s function as a fatherly guide relates to Virgil’s function for to Dante. The boy’s persistent questioning of his father creates movement throughout the narrative, and he always receives an answer that his father sees as consistent with his perspective of the truth. And the boy’s survival depends on his father. Similarly, Virgil answers Dante’s persistent questions with wisdom and safely leads him through hell and purgatory, ensuring Dante’s survival. Virgil’s relationship to Dante can also be described as fatherly, such as when Dante says: “he had laid his hand on mine with cheerful looks that gave me comfort” (3.9-11). The father-son relationship aligns with the man and Virgil as guides and the boy and Dante as followers, but the boy also functions as a moral guide for the father like Virgil does for Dante.

The man refers to his son as “his only warrant” in the beginning of *The Road*, just as Dante’s only warrant is Virgil. The man questions his reasons for living and whether life is worth the suffering and depravity he experiences and witnesses, but he ultimately leans his head toward the road because of his son. Without his son, he would likely take his own life or lose the strength to survive. One morning the sickly man wakes up despondent, worried that his dark heart will corrupt the boy’s goodness, and the narrator confirms, “Some part of him always wished it to be over,” a statement uncharacteristic of the novel’s action-driven narrative (154). Later, however, “He checked the valve on the tank that it was turned off and swung the little

stove around on the footlocker and sat and went to work dismantling it” (154) This sudden activity implies a poetic sigh and gathering of strength. The boy’s pure heart dispels the man’s hopelessness and moves him forward. Without the infallible goodness he sees in the boy’s innocence, the man’s will to survive would be broken. In this way, the boy is his spiritual guide. Similarly, without Virgil, Dante’s will might be broken; but without Dante, Virgil would be stuck in limbo. Whenever fear overtakes him, Virgil leads the way and gives him the confidence to go on. Dante’s trust in Virgil’s prophetic wisdom, like the man’s trust in the boy’s innocent goodness, guides Dante along his journey and stems the tide of his doubt.

Virgil’s prophetic wisdom is also mirrored in the man. John D. Sinclair explains that Virgil historically foretold Christ as a “deliverer of the world from the power of covetousness” (32). Although the man’s belief in God is suspect, his only hope for the world resides in his son. On the third page of the novel, he makes this clear when the man says to himself, “If he is not the word of God God never spoke,” which also summons a foretelling of Christ (5). Virgil’s assertion that Christ will deliver the world from covetousness relates to the man’s dilemma, because the sins of McCarthy’s cannibals and thieves are covetousness. Therefore, both Virgil and the man share powers of prophesy.

The authors’ treatments of these prophet guides share similarities, as well. When Dante and Virgil arrive at the end of purgatory, Virgil must stay behind because his lifetime precedes Christ’s. Similarly, when the man and the boy near the end of the road at the end of the novel, the man dies. Neither Dante nor the boy could have completed their journey to the final destination without their guides, and the guide’s role concludes once the journey’s end is in sight. Virgil must let go of Dante and entrust him to Beatrice, just as the father must let go of his son and entrust him to the kindness of strangers. Meeting another little boy near the road’s end

delivers hope to the father that his own son will be safe and that there is a place on earth for goodness. The son inquires about this new stranger: “But who will find him if he’s lost? Who will find the little boy?” To which the father replies: “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (281). These hopeful last words of the father before he dies in the night reveal a change in his realistic attitude, which was reflected earlier in his plans to shoot his son before he was raped or eaten by “bad guys.” The message he gives his son about the stranger boy implies that the father believes the words to be true of his own son. His qualms about the existence of goodness are resolved. The boy then encounters strangers who take him in and the novel ends. The father cannot survive because he is too old and weak and has been suffering from a hacking cough. His age prevents him from completing the journey to the coast, just as Virgil’s historical situation prevents him from completing the journey to paradise. Neither the man nor Virgil can experience the end of the journey or have full knowledge of the world’s truth revealed to them. Vicariously, through Dante and the boy, they have hope and confidence in human spirituality. Although *The Road* ends shortly after the man’s death when the boy meets the strangers, his continuance on the road implies hope for the world because his father’s wisdom has been passed onto him, and his youthful spirit suggests he has a chance at survival. McCarthy’s treatment of the man before the implied resolution follows Dante’s convention of his treatment of Virgil before the revelation in paradise.

The Road’s setting also relates to the setting of the *Inferno* through its use of religious language. Grindley suggests that in addition to nuclear winter imagery, McCarthy also employs visions from the Book of Revelation. Grindley notes McCarthy’s imagery of “fire from heaven, the trees and the grass burned up, ships destroyed, all sea life dead, the sun and the moon blotted out, plagues and earthquakes, cities full of unburied dead people” as evidence that alludes to the

effects of the Seven Seals, Seven Trumpets, Seven Thunders, and Seven Vials (12). McCarthy's language of biblical Revelation in *The Road*'s setting establishes a connection to the *Commedia*, because Dante conjures his plot from Christian Revelation.

The most obvious similarity between the settings of *The Road* and the *Inferno* occurs in their sheer desolation. Dante's depiction of hell has prompted widespread influence on literature, largely due to the fantastical, haunting setting, laced with wind, ice, and beasts. For example, when Dante and Virgil enter the First Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell, they are forced to flee the Minotaur, who lunges at them "like the bull that breaks loose the moment it has received its mortal stroke and cannot go on but plunges this way and that" through a valley of shattered rock. As the rocks began to fall under their feet, they land at the foot at river of blood "near in which are boiling those that by violence do injury to others" (12.19-21, 41-42). Again, although McCarthy's setting may not require a supernatural imagination, the stark realism of his barren landscape is just as chilling in this aforementioned quote: "The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars I the street caked with ash, everything covered with ask and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day" (12). Dante's projection of a medieval fear of hell is matched by McCarthy's projection of a modern fear of barren hell on earth, which is appropriate due to the lack of a modern, universal belief in the afterlife.

The ominous settings provide an appropriate backdrop for the depraved humans that Dante, Virgil, the man, and the boy meet in the *Inferno* and *The Road*, respectively. Their encounters with sin reveal another similar theme in both works. Dante comes face to face with each level of sin: the incontinent, violent, and fraudulent; and based on the level of sin, images of these sinners become increasingly disturbing. For example, the imagery progresses from the

wrathful sinners relentlessly hurling themselves at one another, while caked in mud; to the treasonous Ugolino, gnawing on Ruggieri's skull like a dog on a bone (7.94-98; 33.66-68). Likewise, the man and boy cross paths with disturbing images of savage humans, or sinners, in *The Road*. One striking image reveals a band of bearded "bad guys" who wear masks and carry homemade spears and bludgeons and are followed by a caravan of "wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with the goods of war...and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each" (92). The savages' sins also acknowledge the sins of America's past, dispelling the myth of American Exceptionalism. Americans have now become the "savages" they conjured to support in the myth of Manifest Destiny and imperial expansion. Another memorable image of the evidence of man's savageness occurs when the boy approaches a clearing and encounters the sight of dead babies, gutted and decapitated, roasting on spits. Although images from the *Inferno* have inspired the etchings and paintings of artists Gustav Doré and William Blake, and *The Road* has inspired the motion picture of producer Nick Wechsler and director John Hillcoat—Dante and McCarthy intend for the vicious scenes of sin to serve a more pointed purpose. These images from the road do not shock the protagonists and readers within the context of the constant depravity throughout McCarthy's novel as much as they might on their own, but they stand out as visceral illuminations of the extent of the savage underbelly of human self-interest. Not only do McCarthy and Dante criticize the dark potential of human nature, but they also comment on the dark potential of social structures. Seeds of the depraved social practices that arise from the chaos must have existed in society before the social breakdown. Women are raped, slaves are chained, and gangs are formed. Those who contributed to the success of these movements probably did not turn into "bad guys" the day the power went out. The arrival of these social

practices as a reaction to chaos suggests that the roots of the problem existed before society crumbled. In order to speculate about human nature and see clearly the seeds of society's problems that sprout in chaotic conditions, *The Road* depicts the extent of human corruption under the lens of apocalyptic anarchy, and the *Inferno* reveals human corruption under the lens of the afterlife—where secret sins are revealed.

Dante, the man, and the boy all agonize when they witness suffering. Despite the fact that the tormented in hell are justly punished, Dante struggles when he witnesses the suffering of those he meets in the inferno. In Canto 3, Dante approaches the gate of hell: “There sighs, lamentations and loud wailings / resounded through the starless air, so that at first it made me weep” (3.21-23). This suffering increases as Dante goes deeper into hell. When the traitors cry frozen tears in canto thirty-three, Dante considers forfeiting his journey when he admits he will go to “the bottom of the ice” himself, unless he can relieve their suffering. The man and the boy endure others' suffering with agony as well, pointing to the human capacity for empathy. They witness the slaves in the basement, prisoners of the caravan, and the earlier suicide of the man's own wife and boy's mother. The boy's urge to relieve the suffering he sees becomes apparent when they pass a man walking on the road who was struck by lightning: “as burtlooking as the country. ... One of his eyes was burnt shut and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blacked skull” (50). The boy begs his father to allow them to help him, but the father, with his Virgilian wisdom, replies, “We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him” (50). The narrative also describes how the lighting survivor looked down when the man and boy pass by him “as if he'd done something wrong,” an allusion to the justice the sinners receive in the *Inferno*. Dante does not experience as much personal suffering as the man and the boy, who starve and freeze. But the vivid descriptions of suffering, sin and desolation in the *Inferno*

ground the dystopia created, because those depraved states debase human dignity and break human will so that the product becomes a truthful depiction of humanity. No papal scepter can disguise Pope Nicholas III's avarice in the *Inferno*, in the same way that no constitution can prevent some Americans from exploiting workers into *de facto* slavery when the government collapses. Therefore, Dante's tropes strip down barriers to reveal truths that would have been otherwise unseen, and McCarthy reworks them to the same end.

The witnessing of torment and sin, combined with the desolate settings of *The Road* and the *Inferno*, illustrate Shelly Rambo's analysis of the Christian "harrowing of hell" (110). "Harrowing of hell" refers to the moment in the Christian Apostle's Creed after Jesus is crucified and descends into hell before he is resurrected. Using theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar's interpretation of the harrowing of hell, Rambo explains that the Christ figure "walks in godforsakenness, barrenness, and desolation in hell," which mirrors the plight of the characters in *The Road* and the *Inferno* (112). She concludes that McCarthy's version of a harrowing of hell does not include a victory in hell, as the term "harrowing" suggests. It is a story of "survival and witness," not resurrection (Rambo 112). *The Road's* structure of survival and witness—not a clearly redemptive structure—avoids a sentimental ending, which is typical of McCarthy. Rambo's reading of *The Road* as a harrowing of hell also offers another interesting comparison to the *Inferno*. She asserts that when Christ (and McCarthy's man and boy) tours hell, he experiences "a rupture between death and life" (113). This harkens to the end of the *Inferno* when Dante arrives at the innermost zone of hell, meets Satan, and is "denied both death and life" (34.24). In the father's memory of a conversation with his wife, he recalls her saying before she takes her own life, "We're the walking dead in a horror film" (55) The father and son also often encounter dead people who are never buried and still appear as if alive: "A man sat on a

porch in his coveralls dead for years. He looked like a straw man set out to announce some holiday” (199). If, according to the narrative of the “harrowing of hell,” the man and boy exist between life and death, then the other survivors, or “bad guys,” also experience this rupture between life and death, which mirrors the anomalous state that characterizes the sinners of Dante’s hell.

The Road’s allusion to Jesus’ harrowing of hell is one of a few cited allusions to Christianity, but Christian diction permeates the novel. Dante uses Christianity as the basis for the *Inferno*’s plot and makes use of many specific Christian allusions. Although *The Road*’s plot is not directly influenced by Christian ideas of the afterlife and does not claim a Christian didactic, the use of Christian words establishes a religious undertone, even if the man’s belief in Christianity remains a matter of conjecture. Grindley recorded the word “God” thirty-three times, “Christ” five times, and McCarthy’s “only published uses of Christianity, creedless, ensepulchred, enshroud, godspoke, and some relatively rare times, including tabernacle and chalice” (12). The diction prevents the protagonists and readers from evading the question of a Christian God within the context of the post-apocalyptic journey, even though it seems godless. McCarthy’s casual uses of “God” incite deeper significance within the context of a world that seems devoid of God. For example, the man contemplates the life of a beggar as he sits across from him at a fire and thinks, “God knows what those eyes saw” (169). In another instance, after discovering a crate of canned goods, the man whispers, “Oh my God,” three times in his disbelief. The scarcity of language and ways in which McCarthy manipulates words prevent the God question from being pondered. The presence or absence of God must be addressed, which draws on a religious similarity to Dante’s Christian revelation.

Although *The Road*'s plot does not center on Christian revelation, like the *Commedia*, the novel's action raises the question: is the spiritual presence a construct of human nature? Comparing *The Road* to the *Inferno* draws further meaning from the sin, suffering, and desolation in McCarthy's novel. However, there are no second and third parts of *The Road* to deliver answers. Virgil is eventually left behind before Beatrice helps reveal the fate of the world to Dante, but Dante receives existential knowledge in paradise. However, *The Road* leaves the existential questions unanswered, which is indicative of a secularized society in which religious discourse in public is seen as uncouth and religious beliefs become personal issues. But McCarthy acknowledges the questions: "Why are we here? Is suffering worth living? Is there any stock in religious virtue? Or altruism?" But these questions are never uttered in McCarthy's sparse, declarative sentences. They are instead poetically illustrated by a physical journey. Those questions are more insightfully addressed by viewing *The Road* as a search for salvation—such as with the *Inferno*—on a chilling journey. But unlike the circular structure of the *Inferno*, *The Road*'s narrative presents a splintered structure of a journey that reflects secular individualism. McCarthy's open ending inspires hope without confirming it, because modern readers by and large have no moral and/or religious social subconscious. The split interpretations of the novel's ending illustrate a sign of the times—a split between religion and secularism that was not as prevalent in fourteenth-century Italy.

FURTHER TEXTUAL COMPARISONS

In a last attempt to draw comparisons between the two works, I will offer a close reading of the closing frame in *The Road* as it alludes to the end of the *Inferno* and also note an allusion to paradise. After his father dies in the woods, not far from the road, the boy sits by him for three days before walking back to the road. Nothing is described about these three days other than,

“He stayed three days and then he walked out to the road,” which can arguably represent a state of “limbo” or purgatory. Once the boy is back on the road, a stranger approaches him, and although the boy usually associates strangers with “bad guys,” he stays put and meets the stranger. The stranger is

dressed in a gray and yellow ski parka. He carried a shotgun upside down over his shoulder on a braided leather lanyard and he wore a nylon bandolier filled with shells for the gun. A veteran of old skirmishes, bearded, scarred across his cheek and the bone stoven and the one eye wandering. (281-282)

The description of this man, who ends up taking in the boy, includes several details that relate to Dante’s description of Satan at the end of the *Inferno*. The gray and yellow parka, an unusually detailed color description for McCarthy, matches the coloring of one of Satan’s heads described in canto thirty-six: “The right seemed between white and yellow” (34-35). Satan’s middle, red head can be identified with the scar on the stranger’s cheek. And Satan’s dark, left head “[that] had such an aspect as the people from where the Nile descends” can be identified with the (presumably) ash-stained or black skin of this veteran traveler (35-37). The stranger’s gory, wandering eye summons a reference to Satan’s six eyes that release bloody foam (43). The image of Satan’s disturbing mouth, used to chomp sinners, relates to *The Road*’s description: “When he spoke his mouth worked imperfectly, and when he smiled” (282). The shotgun carried upside-down over his shoulder coupled with the bandolier over the other shoulder, takes the form of Satan’s “two great wings...[that] had no feathers but were like a bat’s” (37-40). When the man kneels down to talk to the boy at eye-level, “he squatted on one knee and swung the shotgun

up from under his arm and stood it in the road” and simulates a wing flap, just as Satan beats his wings that cause the infernal winds.

Based on the description of the man, McCarthy does not present a harmless image of the helpful stranger, but rather one that would cause fear and threaten danger to a young child. The child instinctively trusts him, nonetheless, and the scary looking stranger helps him, accordingly. In the same way, Dante allows the hugely vulgar-looking Satan to deliver him out of hell to part two of his journey to reach paradise. When the boy asks, “How do I know you’re one of the good guys?” the stranger replies, “You don’t. You’ll have to take a shot” (283). This might summon a passive-negative response, but the stranger implies that the boy must trust him, anyway. Such is the situation when Dante rides out of hell on the back of Satan, who is one of the bad guys. By imposing Satan’s role onto the stranger, McCarthy’s term “veteran of old skirmishes” takes on a comically grand meaning in reference to Satan’s fall from heaven (282). The stranger leads the boy to his family before disappearing from the last two pages, and the boy encounters a woman, who is not described. This woman, who is analogous to Beatrice, immediately embraces him and says, “I am so glad to see you,” as if she knew he was coming.

CONCLUSION

This closing frame implicitly invokes Dante’s paradise and this suggests hope for the boy and some future society. However ambiguous and open-ended one may consider McCarthy’s ending of *The Road*, when the novel is viewed as a dystopic map of hell, the conventions of the genre make clear that hope lies “outside [the] pages” of the novel (Baccolini 7). When he meets the woman, a symbol of fertility, the boy leaves hell behind him. The presence of a Beatrice figure foreshadows a hopeful ending to an epic journey. That said, when the father’s last words prophesy that “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It always will,” the words are not

hollow, but ring true (236). Instead of working with the anti-hero, who is classically “perverted by the American experience and prone to violence,” McCarthy creates true heroes in this pair with the entire dystopic world as their antagonist (Cant 266). In order for McCarthy to follow the father and son and still maintain his authorial voice and critique American Exceptionalism, it is not surprising that he felt the need to exit the reality of the past and present to create a world harsh enough to challenge his steadfast pair. McCarthy created his world wrought with sin, suffering, and desolation—tropes of the *Inferno*—as a tool to reveal the vulnerabilities of his protagonists, the horrors of the rest of humanity, and the harsh nature of the world. And like Dante, the outcome is bleak for those who succumb to the base impulses of human nature, because the natural world does not care about humanity—especially when humanity displays disdain for the world. McCarthy’s message is best described in the context of the father’s instructions to the boy after he wakes up scared from a dream. The father tells him, “When your dreams are some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you” (189). Despite McCarthy’s pessimistic map of hell on earth in his tenth novel, this quote emphasizes the author’s faith—not in God—but in the ardent-hearted human, whose passion is moved by his refusal to settle. The worst sin, then, would be to ignore the sins of others. In this light, McCarthy becomes the “I” that “won’t let you” (189).

Both McCarthy and Dante hold audiences accountable for the present state of the world, because the texts are critical dystopias, which open up the *Inferno* and *The Road* to modern criticism of humanity and society. Dante homage to Aristotle, Socrates, and Homer in hell’s first circle suggests the scope of *La Divina Commedia*’s commentary on humanity and society and implies Dante’s own literary legacy among those great thinkers. So perhaps *The Road*’s textual

allusions to Dante's *Inferno* suggest McCarthy's literary legacy as well and reaffirm his valiant attempt to create a modern "grand narrative" with a dystopic vision.

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