Surviving the Apocalypse : The Role of Women in Dystopian Narratives

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"I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust."

– Jonathan Swift: "A Modest Proposal"

"He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. He looked quickly to see what had happened. What is it? he said. What is it? The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry."

– Cormac McCarthy: *The Road* (pp. 211-12)

In Cormac McCarthy's 2006, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road*, an unnamed boy and his father travel through a harsh, barren landscape, often defined as "post-apocalyptic," "dystopian," or "ecodystopian" (cf. Wood 2007, Frye 2009, Kollin 2011, et. al.), in search of the coast. Along the way, they meet many "bad guys," who are often cannibals, and the occasional good one. But something the reader notices by the time he or she is halfway through the book, if not much sooner, is that there aren't very many women along this decidedly bleak road, and that the one potentially important character for the boy and for us as readers, apart from the boy's father—his mother—commits suicide even before the narrative proper has begun.

In this paper, I will focus on the role that women play in McCarthy's vision of a dying world, especially as related to their ability to bear children. I will also discuss a recent post-apocalyptic dystopian novel entitled *Immobility*, by the contemporary American author Brian Evenson, in which no female characters whatsoever appear, yet in which the subject of procreation—i.e. the means to carry on the human (or post-human) race—is central to the narrative and to the hero's (or, perhaps more accurately, anti-hero's) quest. As a part of this discussion, I will briefly address two earlier dystopian—if not post-apocalyptic—novels written by female authors in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively: *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, and *The Children of Men*, by P.D. James, both dealing with the problem of widespread infertility in their respective fictional populations, and therefore pertinent to my topic.

The Road Less Traveled: Of Dystopias and Post-apocalyptic Road Narratives

Before setting out on our journey along various (treacherous) roads, I would first like to discuss the meaning of the words "dystopia" and "post-apocalypse," thereby limning their similarities and differences. As David W. Sisk defines it in the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas,*

> Dystopia angrily challenges utopia's fundamental assumption of human perfectibility, arguing that humanity's inherent flaws negate the possibility of constructing perfect societies, except for those that are perfectly hellish. Dystopias are solely fictional, presenting grim, oppressive societies—with the moralistic goal of preventing the horrors they illustrate. (Sisk 606)

Sisk also states that "dystopian fiction has become more widespread and popular since the end of World War II" (607), and it is indeed possible to come up with a short list of well-known, highly-regarded examples of dystopian literature after 1945; for example: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, George Orwell's *1984*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*, and so forth. As for what is referred to as "post-apocalyptic" fiction, it is interesting to note that the word apocalypse derives from the term *apokalyptein* (Greek), which itself means "to uncover" or "to reveal" (Knickerbocker "Apocalypse"). Returning to Sisk: "The post-apocalyptic dystopia[1] allows the writer to sweep away the complexities of civilization and concentrate instead on small groups of survivors..." (Sisk 609). This is certainly the case in road narratives such as *The Road* and *Immobility*, while in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Children of Men*, society still exists, in fact is the very reason for which women (and in some cases men) are repressed or treated badly.

Both dystopian fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction would appear to be on the rise in popularity. Dale Knickerbocker, in an article written in 2010, says that "a subject search of the MLA Bibliography yields no fewer than 616 items containing some form of the word apocalypse published in the decade between 1999 and 2009" (Knickerbocker "Apocalypse"). My own "Cute" search via Kyushu University's online system under the term "apocalypse" yielded 124,845 results, with 13,099 for the word "dystopia." But one need not search such academic online catalogs for proof of the genre's popularity. A quick glance at some of the films, books, and comics or graphic novels[2] this past decade has produced should be enough to

1 Note here that he categorizes the post-apocalyptic genre as a sub-genre of "dystopia," rather than as an entirely separate genre.

convince anyone. On the literary front, there have recently been novels by Jim Crace (*The Pesthouse*), Kazuo Ishiguro (*Never Let Me Go*), Haruki Murakami (*1Q84*, the title of which is an obvious homage to George Orwell's *1984*), and, of course, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which, in addition to picking up the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, was a selection for the popular Oprah Winfrey book club in the U.S. Recent films that deal with the apocalypse include *I Am Legend* (based on the novel of the same title by Richard Matheson), *28 Days Later* (which I discuss, below), and Tom Hanks' animated internet-only series *Electric City*.

If, in any case, there is, as suggested above, some distinction to be made between dystopian and post-apocalyptic dystopian narrative, why discuss the specific novels I mentioned in the introduction together? What is it that links them? The answer, I would say, is this: the role of women as childbearers (or, in one instance, the absolute absence of women, which I'll come to). In the case of the two post-apocalyptic novels I will discuss, it shouldn't be too surprising that there are few (*The Road*) or no (*Immobility*) women present in the narrative. As film critic Timothy Corrigan has defined it, there are four major aspects of the road movie genre—which can here be applied to the road genre novel, and to the film adaptation of McCarthy's novel, for that matter—the fourth and last being that it is "a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women" (Corrigan, quoted in Cohan and Hark, 2-3: 143). This "absence" is what first interested me in the subject which I will herein pursue. For, simply, without women, or some substitute thereof, there can be no future society of man. This theme, I argue, serves as an important subtext in the

2 A good example is *Y: The Last Man*, which turns the post-apocalyptic genre on its head by positing a future in which only women and one man/a male monkey survive.

two post-apocalyptic novels I will discuss below, while it is central to the two earlier dystopian novels I will also address.

In the 2003 post-apocalyptic horror movie, *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle, England is taken over by a virus that causes people to lash out in rage at their fellow man and, ultimately, to "infect" others with said virus, quickly turning the country into a place overrun with, essentially, zombies. There are only a handful of "human" survivors in the film, some of whom have formed an army base where they live and fight off the zombies with guns and ammunition. The three surviving protagonists in the movie – a man, Jim; a black woman, Selena; and a teenaged girl, Hannah – have recently joined them when some of the men begin to taunt the woman, Selena. They are reprimanded by their commander, Major Henry West, who afterwards brings Jim into another room for a drink and some man-to-man conversation. It is there that we learn what is really going on at the base.

> Major Henry West: Who have you killed?
> Jim: I killed a boy.
> Major Henry West: A child?
> Jim: Yes.
> Major Henry West: But you had to. Otherwise he'd have killed you. Survival.
> Jim: I understand.
> Major Henry West: I promised them women. Eight days ago I found Jones with his gun in his mouth. He said he was going to kill himself because there was no future. What could I say to him? We fight off the infected or we wait until they starve to death and then

> what? What do nine men do except wait to die themselves? I moved us from the blockade, I set the radio broadcasting and I promised them women. Because women mean a future.
> ("28 Days Later")

"Women mean a future..." How does this apply to the characters in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*? Is there a future in the women, or are they only around in order to provide food for the other cannibals?

Ladies of the Road

Including the conversation told in flashback between the unnamed father and the soon-to-be-dead mother, which lasts for around four pages in my edition (Picador, 2010), I count only five obvious references to female figures in the entire novel. Let us, in this section, take a close look at those references, one by one, and discuss what they may imply. First, though, allow me to present a brief description of the novel, for those readers who may be unfamiliar with its premise.

The Road follows—via a third-person narrative written in a sparse, terse style that is different from the ornate style of many earlier McCarthy novels—a father and son walking on foot along an unidentified stretch of land in the southern U.S. The time is about ten years after a cataclysmic event—possibly of nuclear origin, though the details are left fuzzy—has wiped out most of the population. As Maggie Bortz describes it: "In *The Road*, the chthonic feminine as landscape has been killed off entirely in an unnamed catastrophe ... Given McCarthy's long preoccupation with man's proclivity toward evil, the apocalypse was likely manmade: perhaps an all-

out nuclear war" (39). The boy and his father are headed toward the coast in hopes that they might find something better there. Nothing and no place is safe anymore. Those who remain on earth have been reduced to having to eat human flesh in order to survive, or else they are "the eaten," the victims of bands of violent survivors who hold them captive, alive, only to feast on their limbs. There are few animals, no electricity, and very little real food to be had, most of it canned. The father and son, however, considering themselves "the good guys," do not indulge in the ingestion of human flesh, but seek out such foodstuff in abandoned buildings while watching their backs, for there are always people out to do them harm.

All is a Darwinian struggle: survival of the fittest. Perhaps this is why the boy's mother decides, in philosophical fashion, shortly after the birth of the boy, to check out early.[3] Her sudden appearance in the narrative—related as a flashback, a memory in the father's mind called forth by the boy's wishing he were now together with the mother (which, in essence, implies that he wishes he, too, were dead)—is the first time we meet a female character "on the road," as it were. The first thing I'd like to point out here is the fact that the mother is only the mother (and not "the wife") because she has given birth to "the boy." This function is, I will argue, extremely important, for one thing because, had she not given birth, it is likely that she and the father (who would instead be referred to simply as "the husband") would have checked out together. It is made clear that there are two bullets left in the father's gun, which easily could have been used to end their lives in a relatively quick and painless fashion. The

3 Kenneth Lincoln: "Once again a persistent McCarthy chord laments a world without women, Orphic grief, the eternal loss of the feminine, the surviving male sorrow of endless blues, canticles of abandonment and widowed anguish." (168).

mother says:

> [...]I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We've been over all of this. I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. I thought about not even telling you. You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do. (57-8)

The mother cannot see raising a child in a world such as the one in which the characters in this novel find themselves. However, is she right to say that life is not worth living anymore? Is there, in fact, no hope? She suggests that she and the boy will eventually be raped and eaten. But, after she kills herself,[4] the boy is not raped or eaten, but remains safe beside his father, at least until the end of the narrative, when the father dies and the boy finds a new family to travel with. So, the reader may say to him or herself, perhaps she was wrong to commit suicide? Susan Kollin suggests that "the woman's assessment of what the future might hold may in fact be more accurate than the man's," and emphasizes the suffering that the characters the father and son encounter on the road have been

4 The novel tells us that she did it "with a flake of obsidian" (McCarthy 60). In the online abstract "Ancient Technology in Contemporary Surgery," we learn that "The prismatic glass blade is infinitely sharper than a honed steel edge, and these blades can be produced in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. It is therefore suggested that this type of blade may find an appropriate use in special areas of modern surgery" (Buck). In contrast, in the film version, directed by John Hillcoat, the mother simply walks out into the cold, black night, never to return. The film version also takes some liberties with the character of the mother, extending her role beyond what it is in the book, in order, presumably, to make the viewer of the film feel more for her and to morn her death to a greater extent than we do by just reading the four pages of terse conversation McCarthy gives us in the novel.

exposed to (170), thereby making an argument for the mother's choice. Maggie Bortz says of the mother's death that, "McCarthy seems to suggest that the feminine will be eradicated from the picture entirely[...]" (40), though I would argue that the feminine (in its positive sense) is indeed shown to still be alive and well in the woman—who is also a mother—introduced at the end of the novel, to whom I will return later.

But let us now return for a moment to the mother's function as a giver of life. That is to say that she gave birth to the boy who, at the end of the novel, it is implied, may be the only hope left for the world. As the father puts it early on: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 3). If, as has been suggested by Stephen Frye and James Wood, the boy is a sort of god child, that would make his mother a very important symbol indeed. That she was the vehicle for a life that is good in a world gone bad is, I think, extremely significant. For, in a time and place where there remain few women with the capacity to give birth, there can be few children and, hence, little hope for a better future, or indeed any future at all.

But what of the few other women we meet along "the road." Do they represent, do they keep alive, "the feminine"? The second reference one encounters is as follows:

> "Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. All passed on." (96)

Here we see that there are "perhaps a dozen" women, and that "some of them" are pregnant. They are in the company of slaves, weapons, and "catamites," or young boys groomed for sexual relationships with other males, themselves wearing dog collars and obviously enslaved. This would suggest that there is a dearth of females remaining in the world, and that the ones the men have found are not only kept as property, but used for sex and, ultimately, impregnated. And what, then, is done with their babies? It is likely, going back to the quotation that follows the decidedly ironic one by Jonathan Swift at the beginning of this paper, that they are gutted and eaten. There is, of course, no future in this. Not to speak of its obviously horrible implications, to eat the babies would only be to sustain a very small portion of the surviving population—likely composed primarily of men and a few aggressive women—but it also means that there will be no new human life bred on the earth, no more people allowed to grow to adulthood and, potentially, contribute something of value to the world. To impregnate the few remaining women and in essence kill off their offspring implies the end of civilization. And so, although we only encounter a few women in the novel, their import is absolutely crucial to whether the novel's ending can be interpreted as having some positive overtones or not. For, even if the boy is a sort of living god, as seems to be suggested by the text, he alone cannot produce children.

Women in this novel are also shown, in the following quote, to be, like the men, victims of cannibalism.

> "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of

> them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous." (116)

But women in this world are not only the victims, they are also the perpetrators. As the boy and his father are running away from the house in which they had just stumbled upon these cannibalized humans, we read: "Coming across the field toward the house were four bearded men and two women." (117) Though we only get a glimpse of the women here, this single sentence tells us that not all of the women in *The Road* are victims, as has been implied in the quotes I have presented thus far. Some of them are, along with the men, staying alive by eating human flesh, male and/or female and/or child. Some of them are, in other words, "the bad guys." Though there is no characterization or even description of what such characters might look like in the novel, the fact that McCarthy makes a point of showing us that there are women, too, who eat people, serves as a warning against our jumping to the too-easy conclusion that all women are weak and helpless on the road, or that all women in the novel are inherently "good," like the boy's mother was.

The penultimate paragraph of the novel again presents us with an encounter with a female character, this time the wife of the man whom the boy meets after the death of his father, a man who, we are led to believe, is one of the "good guys." Here is an excerpt of the conversation between the boy and the man at the end of the novel.

> Do you have any kids?
> We do.
> Do you have a little boy?
> We have a little boy and we have a little girl.

> How old is he?
> He's about your age. Maybe a little older.
> And you didnt eat them?
> No.
> You dont eat people?
> No. We dont eat people.
> And can I go with you?
> Yes, you can.
> Okay then.
> Okay.
>
> (McCarthy 303-4).

It is important to note that the man and his wife have two children, a boy and a girl. They, like the boy and his father who are the protagonists of this novel, are obviously still traveling "the road" together, looking for food (not human flesh) and simply trying to survive. I would argue that this is the most hopeful encounter in the entire novel, though it occurs after the tragic death of the boy's father, from illness. To consider that this mother is still alive and has produced offspring, and also that one of the children is a girl, means that there is some hope of continuing the human race, not only through the boy, but also through the girl. In the penultimate paragraph, the mother (simply referred to as "the woman") meets the boy, and the reader, in turn, meets the mother.

> The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said. I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing

> was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (McCarthy 306).

One important thing about this passage is that, as James Wood has keenly pointed out, the woman (mother) is the only figure in the entire novel to embrace the boy apart from the boy's father (Wood). We do not even see the boy's own mother embrace him in the narrative, and when the father asks the mother whether she will tell the boy goodbye before she checks out, she says that she will not (cf. McCarthy 59). In this way, we may think of the woman as a sort of surrogate mother for the boy. Going back to what I said earlier about the boy's perceived holiness, this woman might then be thought of as having some of God in her as well, as representing holiness in a "godforsaken" world.[5] And the fact that she is still able to procreate, and that her children are not simply consumed as food, as with the cannibal population, too, is more hopeful than not. Many have argued, however, about the implications of the final paragraph, which follows that just quoted, above.

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its

5 In one scene, the father and boy come upon an old, bent man in the road and the boy convinces the father to let them feed him. They build a fire and the father sits down with the man, who goes by the name Ely, and has a conversation. The old man claims that there is no God, and that "we are his prophets" (McCarthy 181).

> becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (McCarthy 306-7).

According to Dana Phillips, this passage is "likely to strike his [McCarthy's] readers as more hopeful than it actually is" (186). She goes on to say that, while it is the most beautiful passage in the book, it is also the "most damning." "[W]hat McCarthy describes there is not a (new) new beginning, but an old (new) beginning: the foreclosure of the future, yes, but also the foreclosure of the past" (187). She sees in the trout the end of things, sees them as having been left "high—but not dry—and lonesome, isolated in pockets of high-country watershed, where they have been playing out their endgame ever since" (187).

I don't read this in quite so bleak a light. While the trout may be gone, and the world may be a place that cannot be put back in order, so long as there are "good guys," people "carrying the fire" (this is a metaphor used by the father with the boy to imply strength and compassion, to imply, essentially, all that is good); so long as not all families make babies only in order to eat them; the world can and will go on for a time (for, assuming that the blast was of nuclear origin, and that food supplies will eventually run out, it cannot continue indefinitely). Not everyone, in any case, has to end up like the mother.

Without a Leg to Stand On

The question of whether the human race should in fact continue or be left to

die out in a post-apocalyptic world is at the core of the recent (2012) novel *Immobility*, by the award-winning American author Brian Evenson. In this novel, a man, who seems to be nearly invincible, named Josef Horkai (though the reader is not sure whether or not this is his real name), has just been awakened from a long slumber. He has been kept in storage for many years, and is brought back by a group of men—some of them employing beings seemingly more creature-like than human, such as the two "mules," named Qanik and Qatik, who "look human enough" (Evenson 52) but are in fact neither exactly human nor animal—in order to help them to complete a mission. The group, sometimes referred to as a "hive," is led by one Rasmus. The mission Rasmus wishes Horkai to complete has something to do with retrieving "seed" from a place where, he explains, there will be a "huge hole bored in the side of a mountain" [6] (Evenson 41), a place to which Horkai will be taken by the "mules," also called the Qs; in other words, he will ride on their backs, as his legs do not work (at least not at this point in the novel) due, he is told, to an unstoppable disease, for which he is given injections. The landscape across which they will travel, however, is one that is radioactive, neither safe for humans nor animals, for that matter. This unfriendly, burnt-out, gray landscape has been created by an event referred to as "the Kollaps," which, as in *The Road*, is an unspecified cataclysmic event, likely of nuclear origin.

> He remembered tatters of the Kollaps itself, had a fleeting glimpse of himself panting and in flight, riots, gunfire, rubble. He remembered a bright blast, remembered awakening to find himself burned and naked as a newborn—or perhaps even more naked,

6 We will later learn the name of this place: Granite Mountain.

> since all the hair had been singed from his body or had simply fallen out. He remembered feeling amazed to be alive, but, well, he was alive, it was hard to question that, wasn't it? (Evenson 13)

Horkai questions many things in the novel, but rarely receives straightforward answers. When he asks about what is in the frozen cylinder he is supposed to bring back, he is told by Rasmus simply that it is "seed." And while we, the readers, might put two and two together, Horkai, perhaps because his brain is still muddled for having been asleep for so long, does not.

> "What kind of seed? Wheat or something?"
> "Yes, basically."
> "What makes it special?"
> "It's special because it's been kept safe since before the Kollaps. It's undamaged. We need it to start over." (Evenson 42)

Why might the "hive" need this "seed" to start over? Are there not any women around? Or has everyone suddenly become infertile after the Kollaps? The answers to these questions are yes, and yes. Twice, Horkai thinks that he sees or hears a woman, but both times he turns out to be wrong. First, at the beginning of "Part Four" (there are five parts in all), Horkai awakens after passing out on the road, alone (the Qs by this point have died, leaving Horkai to fend for himself), having rescued the seed and presumably killed the man at Granite Mountain who had taken him in and shown him around.

> *Was he dreaming still? He was somewhere, inside now, a blurry*

> *space, round, as if he were in the center of a sphere. A vague shape, a face, a woman's face, or no, not quite a woman, not exactly human. Or maybe it was just that his eyes couldn't focus.* (Evenson 190).

And then later, after he wakes up,

> "There we are," said a voice soft and smooth as silk. The face it belonged to smiled. At first he thought the face, slender with delicate features, belonged to a woman. And then he wasn't so sure. And then decided it must belong to a man. (Evenson 196).

This is a world, unlike that depicted in *The Road*, without any women *at all*, a world in which men and half-men (referred to on page 193 as "inhuman, as posthuman, as transhuman") who are immune to the harsh environment are the only ones left, the only survivors; this is not a world in which, as in *28 Days Later*, "women mean a future," because there *are* no women and, it is implied, everyone else is infertile anyway. As the character Rykte—who is the same person Horkai thought was a woman in the above quote—explains: "Humans can no longer reproduce. They've been trying for years. They've been rendered infertile. When I found you, you were carrying the possibility of dozens of humans with you, their whole next generation" (Evenson 211). This possibility is contained within the "seed" that Horkai carries with him, seed that is not grain but, rather, "[f]ertilized human eggs" that are "ready to be unfrozen and implanted" (Evenson 211).

The theme of rampant infertility amongst the population of some not-too-distant, bleakly-imagined future is not a new one in dystopian literature.

Two novels in particular that deal with the theme on a large scale come to mind: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (originally published in 1985) and *The Children of Men* by P.D. James (originally published in 1992). But in these novels, the earth still stands as before, there is still food fit to be eaten by humans, society still functions to some extent, though it is quite corrupt, often because of regimes that repress minorities (including or, in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially, women).

In Atwood's vision, women are kept as "handmaids" for assigned commanders whose wives are infertile, and they are given names like "Ofglen" and "Offred" (read as: "of Glen" and "of Fred"). Their "job," having been tested as fertile, is, in essence, to produce children for these families and, if they don't, most are sent to do hard labor in The Colonies (and, it is understood, will eventually die there doing it). Those who cannot bear children at all are labeled "Unwomen," and, it is said, if a handmaid gives birth to a baby with defects it will be labeled an "Unbaby" and "put somewhere, quickly, away" (Atwood 113). In one memorable, albeit uncomfortable, scene in the novel, the doctor who is giving "Offred" a check-up offers to "help" her to make a baby.

> "Most of the old guys can't make it anymore," he says. "Or they're sterile."
>
> I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.
>
> "Lots of women do it," he goes on. "You want a baby, don't you?"
>
> "Yes," I say. It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. *Give me children, or else I die*. There's more than one meaning to it.

(Atwood 61)

As for the reasons for "plummeting Caucasian birthrates" (Atwood 304), the reader is given a hint or two in the book's somewhat tongue-in-cheek, quasi-academic appendix: "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale":

> The reasons for this decline are not altogether clear to us. Some of the failure to reproduce can undoubtedly be traced to the widespread availability of birth control of various kinds, including abortion, in the immediate pre-Gilead[7] period. Some infertility, then, was willed, which may account for the differing statistics among Caucasians and non-Caucasians; but the rest was not. Need I remind you that this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also of the infamous AIDS epidemic, which, once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool? Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal—in some instances these materials were simply dumped into the sewage system—and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbides, and other sprays. (Atwood 304)

In P.D. James's novel, *The Children of Men*, there is no longer even a

7 i.e. Before the faux "period" in which the main text is said to have taken place.

minority of women who are able to give birth, like the above-mentioned "handmaids." Everyone across the globe, it seems, has become infertile, and so all humans on the planet have been left behind to age, without a future. The book opens with a report of the death of the "last human to be born on earth," named Joseph Ricardo; he dies at the age of twenty-five, and is mourned by all (James 3). The narrator describes the time when people realized what was actually going on in his journal as follows:

> I can clearly remember the confident words of one biologist spoken when it had finally become apparent that nowhere in the whole world was there a pregnant woman: "It may take us some time to discover the cause of this apparent universal infertility." We have had twenty-five years and we no longer even expect to succeed. Like a lecherous stud suddenly stricken with impotence, we are humiliated at the very heart of our faith in ourselves. For all our knowledge, our intelligence, our power, we can no longer do what the animals do without thought. (James 6)

What eventually transpires in the novel is that one woman in England, named Julian, a member of a group of dissidents called "The Five Fishes," is found to be pregnant, though her lover is killed off before the reader is told that he was the father (it is later revealed that he had had epilepsy as a child and so wasn't tested for fertility). The baby is ultimately delivered safely, though surrounded by violence, and, it turns out, is a boy. The man who has christened himself the "Warden of England" has his own plans for it. He says, when asked by Theo Faron, the protagonist/narrator, what he will do next:

> "Isn't it obvious? If it's a boy and he's fertile, he'll be the father of the new race. If he produces sperm, fertile sperm, at thirteen—at twelve maybe—our female Omegas[8] will only be thirty-eight. We can breed from them, from other selected women. We may be able to breed again from the woman herself." (James 237)

As hope is concentrated in Julian's pregnancy in James's novel, and in the son she produces, along with other fertile "Omegas," by Xan the dictator, in Evenson's *Immobility* hope is concentrated in the "seed" that Horkai is to carry to Rasmus. But "hope" for whom? In *The Road*, the father and an old man named Ely (though this, like Horkai or Rykte, is not his real name) have a lengthy conversation which turns at one point to a discussion of the human race. Ely believes that they are living in a godless world, and that the world will be better off once humans have died out.

> Things will be better when everybody's gone.
> They will?
> Sure they will.
> Better for who?
> Everybody.
> Everybody.
> Sure. We'll all be better off. We'll all breathe easier.
> That's good to know.
> Yes it is. When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it. He'll say: Where did

8 The Omegas are the last generation born in the mid-nineties.

> everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that? (McCarthy 183-4)

Horkai and Rykte have a similar conversation.

> "But we're not dead yet," said Horkai.
> "With a little luck, we will be soon," said Rykte. "We're a curse, a blight."
> (Evenson 208)

And, a bit further on.

> Horkai looked at him a long time. "You really think humanity should die out?"
> "Objectively, yes," said Rykte. "I've thought about it and thought about it, and rationally it seems the right thing. If we want anything at all to go on, humanity should die out." He turned to Horkai and smiled. "But when I think about it subjectively, it doesn't seem so clear cut."
> "No?"
> "No. So I do nothing. I neither help humanity along toward its own extinction nor do I prevent that extinction from happening. I don't slaughter everyone I meet, don't use well-placed grenades to open the few remaining shelters to the poisons outside. But neither do I help them." (Evenson 208-9)

Eventually, Horkai himself will be forced to come to a decision about what to do with the "seed" he has rescued from the compound. Should he give it

to Rasmus, who may be lying to him about various things and have less-than-pure intentions, or should he destroy it and thereby put an end to civilization as we know it? As has been said, unlike the other novels herein discussed, there are no actual women in the text. The closest thing to a woman that Horkai encounters is a sort of half-man/half-woman creature he stumbles upon on his way to Rasmus's "hive," after making the decision to leave Rykte and to allow the human race to continue in some fashion.

> It was naked. A stake had been hammered into its chest. It was extremely pale and hairless, just like him. He could not tell if it was a man or a woman; the facial features were ambiguous and the hips could have belonged either to a boyish girl or an effeminate man. It had what looked like the beginnings of breasts, but the body itself was chubby and the nipples looked more like those of a man than a woman. Between the legs there was no sex, neither male nor female, but instead what looked like a series of a half dozen strings of pearls in a strange gelatinous casing that seemed to have been extruded from the flesh itself. He bent to get a closer look, but couldn't figure their purpose. (Evenson 231)

Could this being be a hybrid, genetically engineered by scientists belonging to the "hive" to procreate by itself? Could the pearls have something to do with this process? Just as Horkai, whose point of view we follow closely throughout the novel, we, the readers, will never know, though we can conjecture. In terms of the preservation of life, the novel tells us that there are also plant and animal "seeds," and Horkai in fact sees some plants and insects—albeit strange-looking things—along the road, though he also

thinks to himself at one point that "life was coming back, but it was coming back as something else, utterly unlike what it had been before. Another few decades and perhaps it would no longer be a world humans could survive in" (Evenson 229).

In the end, Horkai gives Rasmus his "seed," and Rasmus passes it on to those he trusts. He tells Horkai that he has "dozens of lives on my hands to worry about. I have the continuation of a community to attend to, Josef. Even more than that: the continuation of a species. What does it matter, next to that, if you weren't told things in a way that you could clearly understand them?" (Evenson 237). The larger issue, here, would appear to be as much about Rasmus's lack of honesty and transparency than about the importance of continuing the human race (and, by extension, the "hive," the community, a theme that is arguably absent from *The Road*[9]). But, as readers, we are left to wonder what will happen next, whether women will reenter the picture at any point, or whether the race will continue as a race of "post-humans," perhaps as creatures such as the grotesque being that Horkai encountered with the stake through its chest.

Conclusion

The two post-apocalyptic novels that have herein been discussed implicitly pose the question: should the human race continue after the world-as-we-know-it is gone? Is there hope of anything positive developing in a post-

9 Maggie Bortz says, "In The Road, individual meaning is symbolized in the son's sacred responsibility to carry the light of consciousness, the only thing of value in a post-apocalyptic world, into the overwhelming darkness that confronts him. *This fragile possibility, however, resides in the individual, not within a culture or group* (40; emphasis mine).

apocalyptic world, with or without women? Whereas in McCarthy there seems to be a glimmer of hope, however faint, in the boy and in, as I argue, the new family the boy joins at the end of the novel, in Evenson's work there would appear to be little or none. Horkai is intentionally refrozen at the end of the novel, put back to sleep, made again "immobile," and he, once again (it is implied), loses all of his memories. Rasmus and the "hive," on the other hand, are clearly up to no good. They are breeding a race from "seed" that will obviously be used, much like the babies that are eaten in *The Road*, for their own ends, rather than for the greater good of mankind, a race that likely will not include any women.

Who then, if anyone, can be said to be "carrying the fire" in *Immobility*? And where are the "good guys"? What might a world without women, without "the feminine," as Maggie Bortz terms it, promise? If the post-apocalytpic and dystopian novels discussed are any indication, the world would indeed "go to seed" unless ample fertile men *and* women remained on earth to produce *human* babies. A world without the feminine would truly be, as Major Henry West understood almost too well, a world without a future.

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