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Social Polarization in the Post-apocalyptic Worlds of The Road and I am Legend

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Social Polarization in the Post-apocalyptic Worlds of The Road and I am Legend

Jméno a příjmení:	**Eliška Machotková**
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This thesis analyzes the influence of an apocalyptic event on various social structures and the subsequent changes in society, and the ways in which surviving individuals and communities attempt to reconstruct and rebuild their societies in the The Road and I Am Legend (both the books and their film adaptations). The aim is to analyze the changes and the respective states of the societies portrayed in these works after an apocalyptic event that forces humankind into forming new social units, affected by several obstacles.

The method used will be a comparative analysis of *The Road* and *I am Legend* with special emphasis on representations of the new condition of society and its inner division.

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Vedoucí práce: Dávid Levente Palatinus, Ph.D.
                      Katedra anglického jazyka

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Anotace

Tato práce analyzuje vliv apokalyptické události na různorodé sociální struktury a z toho vyplývající změny v společnosti spolu se způsoby, jak se jedinci a komunity z děl *Cesta* a *Já, legenda* (v knižní i filmové podobě) pokoušejí o její znovuzaložení a vybudování. Cílem je analyzovat tyto změny a prozatímní stavy společnosti vyobrazené v jednotlivých dílech poté, co udeří apokalyptická událost, která přinutí lidstvo k formování nových sociálních jednotek, zároveň postižené několika překážkami.

Práce bude vypracovaná metodou komparativní analýzy *Cesty* a *Já, legenda* se zvláštním důrazem na reprezentaci těchto nových podmínek společnosti a její vnitřní rozdělení.

Klíčová slova

Post-apokalyptický, společnost, sociální struktury, dezintegrace společnosti, morální krédo

Anotation

This thesis analyses the influence of an apocalyptic event on various social structures and the subsequent change in society, and the ways in which surviving individuals and communities attempt to reconstruct and rebuild their societies in *The Road* and *I Am Legend* (both the books and their film adaptations). The aim is to analyse the changes and the respective states of the societies portrayed in these works after an apocalyptic event that forces humankind into forming new social units, affected by several obstacles.

The method used will be a comparative analysis of *The Road* and *I Am Legend* with special emphasis on representations of the new condition of society and its inner division.

Key words

Post-apocalyptic, society, social structures, disintegration of society, moral code

Contents

1 Introduction

The genre with the attribute "post-apocalyptic" seems to participate in today's mainstream pop culture remarkably, given the amount of book series, films, video games, or comic books on the current market. The rise of this particular genre, especially in the twenty-first century, is something that did not go unnoticed by Heather J. Hicks (2016, 5), who also comments on the sudden popularity and especially the interest of various scholars and critics, which eventually influenced her book, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century*. The idea of a once-balanced world being shuttered to pieces together with its society represents quite a shocking view of us as humankind and the ways we operate to survive. It opens not only new creative possibilities but also several philosophical questions centered mainly on moral dilemmas, the human will to survive, and the nature of relationships that suffer under the conditions of a hostile environment, which serves, as Hill argues in her *Post-Apocalyptic Literature: Humanity's Survival Tool* (2018), as a catalysator of reader's thinking about what makes us human:

> Encountering acts of desperation and senseless animosity as they accompany
> characters through the post-apocalyptic wastelands, readers consider what is to
> be human, how humanity is challenged at the world's end, and by what means,
> if any, humanity can be saved (1).

When one world is destroyed, another one will rise. This thesis focuses on what are these forms of so-called new worlds (in a sense what has happened to the structure of society) and how these new units function between each other and cope with the obstacles caused by either specified or unspecified apocalyptic events.

The method used in this thesis is a comparative analysis of *The Road* and *I Am Legend*, focusing primarily on factors like the disintegration of the society,

society/family and its units, and the concept of monstrosity functioning in both samples. Since both novels dispose of their film adaptation, they will be taken into consideration when they provide additional observations relevant to the concern of the thesis. In the case of *I Am Legend*, only the adaptation (apart from the novel itself) from Francis Lawrence from 2007 will be analysed.

Even though the post-apocalyptic genre and the novels themselves are a generous source of material for scholars, the social aspect of these worlds does not seem to be an object of exploration very often. Therefore, the goal of *Social Polarization in The Post-Apocalyptic Worlds of The Road and I Am Legend* is to analyse chosen pieces of work, describe the point of view they are set at, and provide an overview of different approaches towards viewing or imagining the structures of newly formed social units that are forced to live in a deadly world and what are the challenges they must face.

2 Post-apocalyptic genre

2.1 Origins of the term "apocalypse"

Despite the current popularity of the post-apocalyptic genre, the image and idea of apocalypse occurs across human history. The term itself without the prefix "post", *apocalypse*, can be found in the Bible's *Book of Revelations*, describing the upcoming end of the world and the second coming of Christ. This description corresponds with the Oxford Dictionary definition (2023), which is described as "the destruction of the world" or "a situation causing very serious damage and destruction". The word is of Greek origin - *apokálypsis*, meaning "to take the cover off" ([dictionary.com,](dictionary.com) 2023). With all these descriptions combined, the conclusion remains the same – apocalypse refers to a certain type of destructive end of the world. Given the prefix "post", the whole compound post-apocalyptic refers to a state *after* the end itself. It is one of the reasons this thesis will not focus on the causes of the apocalyptic event rather than the aftermath of it.

The images of the end of the world seem to fascinate humankind since its beginnings. As mentioned above, an apocalypse is an event believed to happen in Christianity, but also in Norse mythology, where Ragnarök represents the actions before the final and last battle of the gods, followed by the end of the world and its rebirth. Other examples of apocalyptic events appear in the Maya culture and even in several others, and they show two major conclusions. One is that the human first thoughts of a final world destruction are tied to religion, and the second is that it provably appears across different religions and cultures, showing only how vast and significant these ideas of a final apocalypse are for us as humanity, and keep mesmerize.

2.2 The roots and characteristics of the genre

It is no wonder that the fascination with humankind's demise gave birth to the genre of post-apocalyptic narratives. Berger (1999, 5) explains the role of an apocalypse in his *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* as "The End":

> The apocalypse, then, is The End, or resembles the end, or explains the end. But nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end.

Berger points out the paradox fact of a non-existent *true* end, since even the apocalyptic event itself does not mean an actual annihilation, but rather a restart, putting people at the beginning, as Barbara Gurr (2015, 1) observes:

> We who survive will have to build something new out of the ashes. The emerging world may be desperate and dirty; it may be hard and hungry; it may be something completely unexpected.

This genre offers the opportunity to explore the great beyond, what happens after the end of the world as it is known today. Furthermore, it offers an idea, a vision, of what our society could look like or break into because when faced with a world stripped down to primitive roots, society returns to such a primitive state as well (2). Another interpretation of this genre says, "I define postapocalyptic fiction as any account that takes up how humans start over after the end of the life as we understand it" (Curtis, 2010, 5). Following the pattern of starting over, most scholars give similar definitions of post-apocalyptic narratives. Therefore, when speaking about the end, the true meaning behind that is the idea of what the humans do *after* this end. The vision of our own species starting over and being unable to come back to its previous way of life seems to be the core of this genre, thus making it a dominant characteristic.

The post-apocalyptic genre appears throughout different media, namely films, games, and, of course, literary fiction. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) are commonly assumed to stand at the roots of post-apocalyptic fiction, fulfilling the trope of starting over, or in the first case, foreshadowing the dawn of modernity and preparing the way for later narratives of this sorting (Hicks 2016, 2).

Even though this genre is generous in terms of creative possibilities, the apocalyptic events destroying society are often portrayed in similar ways, the annihilating trigger follows a pattern that is used repeatedly throughout different works.

It may hint towards the fact that the authors of these works tend to portray the same types of events because that is their probable scenario that could happen in reality, so it adds to the feeling of authenticity, an unavoidable path that humanity is destined to walk on sooner or later. In his book, *The End of the World: the Science and ethics of human extinction* (1996), John Leslie describes several causes that most often stand behind society's demise and adds a historical inside into why these types of doomsday occur frequently in post-apocalyptic narratives. The most popular are nuclear and chemical threats, wars, diseases, pollution, and other biological or environmental crises, all leading to humankind's collapse and restart.

3 Social polarization in *The Road* and *I Am Legend*

3.1 An overview of the novels

3.1.1 The Road

The Road is a novel by American author Cormac McCarthy, written in 2006 and set in a post-apocalyptic world full of grey wastelands and everlasting danger in the form of violent raiders, challenging both the father and his son on their way to the coast to survive winter. The novel was adapted into a film in 2009 by 2929 Productions, presenting quite faithful adaptation, often with page-to-screen precise moments.

Following the road, the father and son encounter not only physical danger from their fellow survivors but also existential ones, raising philosophical and moral questions, like what it means to be a human and what are the requirements for remaining one. Joyce (2016) describes the main interest of *The Road* as "not why catastrophe occurred but what it means to be human when the civilization that structures our ethical beliefs has vanished" (8).

3.1.1.1 Overview of McCarty's work

Cormac McCarthy was an American writer, whose characters are described as often unpredictable, situated in rural locations of American South and Southwest. His novels are distinguished by their somber depictions of violence, intricate prose, and stylistic intricacy. McCarthy often explores the theme of good and evil and the price for it, as is seen in his critically acclaimed violent tale *Blood Meridian* (1985), or in the novel *The Road* (2006), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007 (Britannica.com 2023).

The Road is critically acclaimed by several critics and still remains a subject for many scholars today. Even though the content of the novel is characterised by a plain discursive style, it hides several complex layers. Snezana Djurić in her *"If you died, I would want to die too." – Psychoanalystic Approach to Cormac McCarthy's The Road* (2023) points out the relationship between the father and his son and the importance of his development through the father's stories which gives him hope and needed reassurance, exploring the novel from psychological point of view. Erik Wielenberg (2010) describes the novel as a "meditation on morality" (1) and emphasizes the pivotal role of morality and its connection to religious belief. Other scholars, like Adeline Johns-Putra, focus on the aspect of climate and humanity's participation in its destruction. Johns-Putra (2016, 520) marks *The Road* as "an expression of human experience in an era of desperate damage to the nonhuman environment".

The number of possibilities in terms of interpretation or critique seems large enough to remain relevant even today, which just displays the complexity of McCarthy's work.

3.1.2 I Am Legend

I am Legend (1954) is an American post-apocalyptic novel set during the 1970s' in Los Angeles, following Robert Neville, the last of his race, as he tries to survive and navigate in the age of vampires, which are fellow humans mutated by an unknown virus or bacteria Neville decides to examine. His research, however, is constantly at risk as his life is threatened by those vampires, who will not stop until Robert is dead.

3.1.2.1 Overview of Matheson's work

Richard Matheson was a prolific author and crafted numerous enduring novels and short stories spanning a diverse array of genres, including terror, fantasy, horror, paranormal, suspense, science fiction, and western themes (goodreads.com 2023). His common themes consist of alternative realities, paranormal terror, and survival (mopop.org 2023). *I Am Legend*, probably his best-known novel, was adapted into three films, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007), which is the only film adaptation that will be eventually analysed in this thesis.

I Am Legend is considered to be the first significant vampire story in the 20th century (Schuller 2009, 78), even though the main focus and attention throughout the novel are drawn to a human protagonist and not to the vampires. The tension and everlasting fight between them and Robert Neville are often interpreted as a display of racist behaviour on Neville's side. "Reflecting racial tensions in the United States of the 1950s, Neville is eventually revealed to be the 'last of the old race,'" says Heyes (2017, 1), who analyses the aspect of race and religion in his article, *Fixing Ground Zero: Race and Religion in Francis Lawrence's I Am Legend*, and comments on the racial conflict as the central theme of the novel (1). Other critics support this point and argue that "Neville has developed an idiosyncratic racist outlook: Regarding his own 'pure,' uncontaminated blood as the norm, those who deviate from it are considered dangerous and have to be killed" (Schuller 2009, 85), which just highlights the racial subtext present in the novel. While some of the scholars focus on these aspects, some pay attention more to the gender-related issue, like Shipley and Williams (2023), who view *I Am Legend* as a metaphor symbolizing the collapse of patriarchy, together with other social issues regarding the status of men (93). Regardless of the number of critics or interpretations, most of them accentuate the social-related subtext present in the novel.

3.2   The Collapse of Society

According to Roberts (2019), the urge to imagine the end of the known world and system origins in the natural need to create an antipole to an already existing functioning reality, in the curiosity of possible consequences of humanity's destruction. Following the frequent pattern of "depicting the aftermath of a more profound societal collapse" (Roberts 2020, 1), this chapter seeks to analyse the schemes of society's and the old world's collapse.

The Road

> "Who is it? said the boy.
>
> I dont know. Who is anybody?" (McCarthy 2006, 49)

The Road starts right away on the road, intentionally not introducing the old world or the previous events that happened to the father and his son before the moment the narration focuses on their path. Yet several clues hint at what kind of world and environment the man and the boy must face and live in.

The first one is rather apparent since its core lies in the textual description of the environment itself. This description is primarily based on the visual side of objects, which is also a major motif for Stark (2013, 74), who points out an "image centrally concerned with vision." One of the dominant features of the visual description of McCarthy's world is the overall absence of light and brightness. Edwards (2007, 4) comments on this aspect in his work, where he demonstrates the reoccurring motif of darkness in the opening of *The Road* itself and refers to its landscape as "largely mute, darkened, clouded, its color palette stripped of beauty and diversity and reduced to variations of gray." The very first introduction of the environment consists of grey,

dead nature, stripped of colours and any signs of life. Even the light is grey, the only colours that disturb this dim atmosphere are the ones from fire or blood, symbols that can stand both for life and death, depending on the context. Light has become one of the main survival tools, which can be exemplified by the man and the boy collecting drops of oil, followed with the explanation: "Oil for their little slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns" (McCarthy 2006, 7). This combination of light and colour and its importance is further encouraged by the boy's hope to see the sea, who is later only left disappointed because the beach and the sea are grey and lifeless just like the rest of the country. Their journey is suddenly marked with another depressing reminder that there is no life, a hint of joy or colour waiting for them:

> He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment on his face. I'm sorry it's not blue, he said. That's okay, said the boy (McCarthy 2006, 215).

This, on the surface, shallow dialog only further highlights the realisation the world is probably all gone after all, offering no safe place or comfort. The only shelter for these characters is having each other and faith in goodness.

These observations serve as a clue discovered just via the visual appearance of the natural environment, and that is why even such grey and nondiverse descriptions still offer valuable information. Starting on the general surface, several more complex demonstrations of what has happened to society, or if there is any form of a newly constructed one, follow.

Past the appearance of habitat surrounding the characters, subsequent examples deepen the insight into the circumstances of the social polarization in this world. Not completely abandoning the aspect of environmental hints, the man and the boy discover several hung bodies, where the father reveals they committed suicide. Suicide

and the act of killing a significant one to spare them from a fate worse than death, or simply end the suffering is not an uncommon motive in the novel (and in the film adaptation as well), thus revealing the world around does not offer conditions allowing to live without existential fear. Death is a fatal way of achieving safety or freedom the broken world cannot provide, which drastically shifts the common setting of human (or any live) beings, where the self-preservation instinct is so strong, that death is the absolute opposite of what is the aim – to survive, to avert the death of self, not willingly causing it.

The father experiences a constant battle with the dilemma of whether he will be able to kill his son to, paradoxically, save him from greater danger or horrors, such as being eaten by cannibals or used as a sex slave.

> He watched the boy sleeping. Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you? (McCarthy 2006, 29)

> Can you do it? When the time comes? […] What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? (114)

Those quotes containing the inner thoughts of the father declare the preceding statements, especially emphasizing that killing the son out of mercy is not an impulsive thought or desperate idea at that moment, rather than an aware decision occurring in his head repeatedly on the road as they face obstacles in form of violent survivors. These drastic situations manifest the father's psychological trauma, as it puts Carmen Laguarta Bueno (2019, 79), although her suggestions mark the man's thinking about killing his son as intrusive (79), whereas my analysis, based on the examination of the father's thoughts, sees it as the opposite.

From the start of the novel, the duo is hiding, confirming that danger is waiting everywhere. There is no spotted reconstruction of social order or any kind of unity at least mimicking the old manners of society. The one basic rule that exists here is either to kill or be killed, however, that is something the father tries to avoid and not live by, hoping to overcome this new fundamental principle by carrying moral values and seeking goodness.

Nevertheless, even though the boy lives in constant fear of what will happen to his father or both of them, he faces a moment where he reaches the state of mind where continuing on living does not sound like a convincing path to follow.

There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?

I dont care, the boy said, sobbing. I dont care (McCarthy 2006, 85).

It should be said that compared to his father, the boy's words are more of an impulsive nature, reacting to the moment when he wants to see a little boy of his age, but his father forbids him to do so. Also, due the suffering from all the horrors on the road, the boy is another unfortunate victim of trauma (Bueno 2019, 79), and has to cope with the constant fear of ending up alone, which eventually makes him more frightened of solitude than of being killed (Djuric 2023, 8). All together, these moments illustrate how tragic conditions define this new world.

Probably the most convincing evidence and declaration of an utterly shattered society is the occurrence of cannibalism. The decay of hospitality, morality, and togetherness reaches a point where the human being is no longer perceived as an equal individual of the same kind rather than a subject to eat or rape. This described point of

view does not apply to all the characters appearing in the novel but still represents the most significant threat and fear occurring in this post-apocalyptic world.

One of the most horrifying moments and images both from the novel and its adaptation happens when the man and the boy are searching for food in what seems to be an abandoned house. Entering the cellar, the father witnesses a substantially disturbing view – a group of naked, huddled people, kept imprisoned for limb amputation, getting completely eaten by the time. Another similarly disconcerting scene takes place later in the novel when the duo discovers a camp of other survivors, together with a headless and gutted infant spiked on a spit. Considering such behaviour, these scenes confirm the absence of social norms or order, or human empathy in general. Cannibalism is not, however, the only form of mistreatment towards the unfortunate survivors, as sex slavery also occurs as a probable common practice, as the father and the boy observe a march consisting of chained people, including pregnant women.

The final clues are the ones told through the dialogs themselves, which are especially enriching in terms of slight mentions of the old world before the apocalypse. Moreover, it is a confirmation that the setting of the novel is truly a post-apocalyptic one, and, as it is explained, one that is defined and sculptured only by the remains of "our" world (Joyce 2016, 7). The father mentions some of the remnants of the old world when he talks with his son:

Why are the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I don't know exactly. That's a good question (McCarthy 2006, 43).

A lot can be understood from this dialogue. There were indeed functioning states, thus civilization, but that is something that has vanished and no longer exists. The man makes an interesting point when he says he does not know what happened to the states, hinting the disintegration of society probably had a quick and subtle progression rather than a visible one in the forms of gradually disappearing social bonds and order. However, the only source of what the old world looked and functioned like is the man himself, and thus "the old text of the world is virtually lost, a dead language preserved only as a fading memory." (Edwards 2007, 5). The potential survival of society and its norms lies only in those gradually disappearing mental fragments of the past, with the question of whether it is even possible or desirable to reconstruct the old state, as implied in the final passage of *The Road*: "[…] patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again" (McCarthy 2006, 287). Edwards (2007, 9) notes that these final words function as a depressing counterpart to the previous boy's and woman's conversation about rescue or the promise of the dying father about goodness.

Another clue on the contrast between the world before and after the apocalypse comes from the retrospective dialogs between the man and his wife. They're discussing upcoming steps since the world has collapsed and the streets are filled with rapers and violence. Because such state is unbearable for the woman, she suggests rather killing themselves, but the father does not allow this. The woman still refuses to live under these new horrifying conditions and leaves to commit suicide. The memories and dreams haunting the man do not offer comfort though. Rather than an

"Edenic" past, these flashbacks seem to uncover the beginnings of the destructive and painful end (Edwards 2007, 7), leaving little space for inner peace and hope for better days, setting the novel's tone into rather depressing.

With all these various elements analysed, a probable image of social polarization can be constructed. The specific forms are going to be discussed later, this conclusion serves as an opening to the topic of whether the society in McCarthy's world is disintegrated and if it is the case, what are the arguments and evidence to claim so. Several examples analysed in this chapter declare the absence of social order, which results in various disturbing patterns of behaviour observable in formed groups of survivors. A significant remark arises from this examination – if there is a unit that could be considered as a possible form of a closed compact society, an extent of deviant conduct appears in such a group.

I Am Legend

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* starts with the description of the protagonist's typical day, which is somewhat different from the routine of the duo from *The Road*, but there is still a particular detail occurring in both works. It seems that both McCarthy and Matheson visualize their post-apocalyptic landscapes as grey environments, at least for their novel's openings, working with the absence of brightness and sunlight. Even though in the world of *I Am Legend* there is sunlight later, those opening parts declare there is a general concept of what a post-apocalyptic environment probably feels like – as a "dull gray" (Matheson 1954, 1) day, already setting a somber atmosphere, hinting these worlds probably lack more than sunshine.

Robert Neville thinks of himself as the last man on earth, or at least in Los Angeles. This perception dramatically changes the way the issue of social polarization can be analysed in this paper, raising the question of whether there is even anything to discuss, given the state of a solo survivor. Despite this, the novel still offers several parts to be examined, starting with the way of portraying the destruction of society.

Matheson chooses a less subtle approach in delivering information on what had happened to the society of the old world, starting with the description of the protagonist's ordinary day, basically, the same way McCarthy introduces his characters. Film adaptations follow the same pattern, as it is a commonly used method of introducing characters, especially in the post-apocalyptic genre, where the creators want to give a proper introduction to what has life become now when the old order is gone. Given the emphasis on Robert's daily routine, regularity and daily rituals seem to keep Robert's sanity under control. In *The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework* (2017), Hobson et al. discuss and categorize

three functions of rituals: "We propose that rituals' diverse functions can be categorized into three regulatory categories. Rituals can regulate (a) emotions, (b) performance goal states, and (c) social connection to others" (4). Neville's actions can slightly vary throughout the novel, however, there are given hints about his regular practices like "He'd go to bed and put the plugs in his ears. It was what he ended up doing every night, anyway" (Matheson 1954, 9) or his constant chase with vampire-turned former friend Ben Cortman. These smaller and greater habits and rituals fit into the categories of ritual functions. Apart from drinking alcohol, it is the regime that helps him cope with his unprocessed emotions and simultaneously with the progress in his research on vampirism. The function of the social connection, however, takes a compelling turn as the aspect of social bonding cannot happen here. Yet for Robert, the connection happens on the level of staying in touch with some structure in his solitary life. For him, there is no social structure left, so he must put some at least into his behaviour and actions.

The 2007 film adaptation, however, at the very end, explores and later confirms the possibility of a survival colony, declaring that along with solo survivors like Robert, a new society is being reconstructed. The glimpse of the colony shows quite a regular village-like place, with a church, its inhabitants, and armed men guarding the colony against the darkseekers.

What if Matheson also introduced a new society? He did, but in a way the reader would not expect. In her article, *Attributing Minds to Vampires in Richard Matheson's I Am Legend*, Nutall (2015, 22) analyses how Matheson manipulated the text of his novel through "mind attribution" where focalisation was used to portray the vampires as mindless primitive beasts, which, for most of the novel, partly justified

Neville's actions towards them. However, everything changes when Ruth reveals the truth to Robert via her final letter:

> Robert, now you know. Know that I was spying on you, know that almost everything I told you was a lie. […]
>
> But now it's different. I know now that you were just as much forced into your situation as we were forced into ours. […]
>
> […] It was the discovery of this pill that saved us from dying, that is helping to set up society again slowly (Matheson 1954, 144).

Coming with this final twist, it is discovered "that far from being the mindless entities suggested by their focalised construal, the vampires are thinking, feeling beings with complex motivations, fear, and beliefs" (Nutall 2015, 22-23). It was never set for humans to rebuild society as the 2007 adaptation suggests, but for the vampires, *the Other*, to rise into a new one.

The idea of social polarization takes different directions in the hands of McCarthy and Matheson. *The Road* displays the results of the apocalypse as an inevitable disintegration of society, destroying almost everything, whereas Matheson focuses more on the inner world of a surviving individual and introduces a number of thought-provoking questions and visions, but he does not destroy the idea of a functioning society in the process, whether it is reconstructed by humans or a new species.

3.3   Quest for Survival

In a destroyed world where civilisation has vanished, what formations remain or are newly created? The survival of humanity represents a fundamental plot element for the post-apocalyptic genre (Hill 2018, 125). Suddenly, once completely basic daily actions, like grocery shopping (obtaining food) or waking up in the morning, are

something almost unimaginable, turned into a literal quest for survival. As Roberts discusses in her *The Psychology of Dystopian and Post-Apocalyptic Stories: The Proverbial Question whether Life Will Imitate Art* (2020),

> Without the structure that has maintained the hierarchy of power, life becames a romanticized adaptation of Darwin's survival of the fittest and we become masters of our own fate, at least theoretical (5).

The post-apocalyptic genre explores these scenarios and focuses on the various fates of those who remained. This chapter analyses the stakes of surviving, what has been lost, and what is new to fight or cope with.

Since the unavoidable danger is present everywhere, the dynamic of everyday life transforms into something else, pushing the survivors into situations where they must confront often the most gruesome of challenges. Both Matheson and McCarthy put their protagonists to a test, where they need to overcome threats represented not only by the nearby newly occurring enemies but also the ones in their heads. The challenge for the potential new society is as much about defeating the physical danger as about not losing its humanity in the process, which is not an easy task when directly facing the destruction of once-strong social structures.

3.3.1.1   The disintegration of basic social units
The Road

In *The Road*, an option for a group consisting of more than a few individuals is not probable. A larger group would either draw attention or constantly starve, because as it is seen in the novel, finding food is a highly challenging task even for the man and the boy. It is these two who form a kind of miniature unit, held together by a father-son bond. The question arises – could there be a unit of two, whose relationship would not be based on family ties, and still function the same way as the father and son

portrayed in the novel (and film)? It is a quite hypothetical question where the answer probably cannot be provably concluded or reached just based on the analysis of the text itself, nevertheless, it still carries value in the form of thinking what the nature of the relationship between the man and the boy is and how it influences them as a unit and their survival.

In terms of social structures, family would be one of the typical examples. Parents and a child/children represent a basic unit that is part of a larger system – society. The Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines society as "a large group of people who live together in an organized way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the work that needs to be done." Not only it has been already established that in the world of *The Road*, the society has collapsed and there are almost no signs of its successor, but the primal unit of the family has been shattered as well.

The change in the structure of the family in this post-apocalyptic world is either seen as its no existence at all or partially parentless as seen in the case of the man and the boy, with the only exception of the family at the end of the novel, which takes the boy into its care. The unit of the father and the son lacks a mother, a figure described by Berit Åström (2018, 3) as one that is seen as "tender, nurturing and self-sacrificing" in many cultures. Taking that into consideration, the once-present mother of the boy does not seem to belong in this picture, at least based on the known information from the early time of the apocalypse. Perhaps her version of her son's protection is the act of suicide because the horrors of waiting outside are worse than death itself, however, that does not change the fact that her husband does not see it that way as he is motivated to keep going and do everything to keep his son alive and well, which again, goes into opposition with the mother's vision for her child. As she vanishes and dies, there is

no other option than being on their own as a father and a son, where the father seems to substitute for the mother (4), who has become a "non-entity with no relevance to the lives of her husband and son" (4). That puts the man into (by most cultures) a sort of non-traditional position, creating a miniature social family unit, which must now figure out how to navigate themselves in these cruel conditions and find a motivation to keep living, something that the mother did not have and purposely killed herself as a consequence of this lacking purpose in life.

I Am Legend

There is no family left for Robert from *I Am Legend* as it is revealed in the novel's flashbacks, in which his daughter Kathy and wife Virgina die due to the virus. The 2007 film adaptation also includes the death of his family, however, the loss of his family to a vampire virus is replaced by a helicopter accident during the evacuation from the infected city. The film adaptation takes away the direct link to the tragedy of the vampirism infection, making the novel's Neville more relatable in terms of his hatred and violence towards vampires. The result of their death leads to Neville's cycle of grief and depression, more so when he experiences the death of his wife not only once, but twice. The second time, however, he killed her directly (Madani 2022, 54). His strong devotion towards his family is elucidated in the act of refusing to burn the infected body of his wife, wishing to bury her traditionally:

> He knew that. He knew it was the law. But how many people followed it? He wondered that too. How many husbands took the woman who had shared their life and love and dropped them into flames? How many parents incinerated the children they adored, how many children tossed their beloved parents on a bonfire a hundred yards square, a hundred feet deep?

No, if there was anything left in the world, it was his vow that she would not be burned in the fire (Matheson 1954, 62).

Similarly, as in *The Road*, even this post-apocalyptic world is tied to multiple destructions of family units, leaving the protagonists torn apart, and incomplete. However, the details on the causes of these disintegrations differ – in *The Road*, the mother dies by her own hand, making it her own decision, whereas Virgina (and her daughter) had no such choice.

What is noteworthy is the relationship between Robert and the dog. As established, the father and his son from *The Road* form a miniature social unit, completely dependent on each other, which is something Neville lacks and yearns for. This component is where the novel and the film adaptation differ in a significant manner. The role of the animal in the novel starts with Robert's obsessive need to capture a street dog that appears infected, thus possibly relevant to his research of vampirism:

> He tried briefly to get back to the problem of the bacilli, but he realized that he couldn't concentrate on anything except the dog. To his complete astonishment, he later found himself offering up a stumbling prayer that the dog would be protected. It was a moment in which he felt a desperate need to believe in God that shepherded his own creations.
>
> […] Because he wanted the dog, because he needed the dog (86).

Unfortunately for Neville, the dog dies no longer after his final capture and Neville's brief moment of joy, putting him back to his depressing solitary life. In Lawrence's version, however, the purpose of the dog is much more eminent. Sam, a German shepherd, is Robert's loyal companion from the beginning, helping him not only in physical fights but also with the only social connection he has left in the world.

According to Merkouri et. al. (2022), authors of the study *Dogs and the Good Life: A Cross-Sectional Study of the Association Between the Dog–Owner Relationship and Owner Mental Wellbeing,* "Dog ownership contributes to both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing in multiple ways, including supporting owners through periods of poor mental health and providing purpose" (1). Sam stands between Robert and despair and provides him company and much-needed contact with any living being that has not been turned yet. Moreover, Sam used to be Robert's little daughter's puppy which she gave him moments before her death, which leads to a probable possibility of Robert's perception of Sam as a living memento of his deceased child or even as his own child. This bond makes the tragedy of Sam's later infection and merciful death by her own owner's hands even greater, almost as if Neville lost another child, which is a common feeling among dog owners who mourn their pet loss, characterised by strong negative and painful emotions, including regrets and self-blame (Rujoiu and Rujoiu 2014, 479). This loss later results in Robert's attempt to commit suicide. This narrative decision puts greater emphasis on the importance of socialisation and the human need for bonding, even more so in the terrifying conditions of a post-apocalyptic environment.

3.3.1.2   The purpose of surviving

Being successful in defeating the physical danger is not always enough in post-apocalyptic environments. Sooner or later, people will start to question the motivation and purpose of their crippled life. The purpose of life has been a great concern for humankind since its beginning, influencing philosophers like Aristoteles, who sees purpose in everything, or Plato, who seeks the goal in wisdom and understanding. Coming a far way from these great ancient minds, the characters from *The Road* and *I Am Legend* must deal with this dilemma on their own, in worlds much crueller.

The Road

It is plainly stated by the father in *The Road* that his son is the only thing that stands between him and death (McCarthy 2006, 29), therefore it can be concluded the main motivation of the man is to keep his son alive and teach him *how* to stay alive. There is, however, a deeper motivation and notional goal beyond this intention.

Throughout the whole novel, it is repeatedly mentioned that the man and the boy "carry the light". This metaphor is an object of many discussions and interpretations as it is tightly tied to the core values and system of belief which represents the man's source of strength and motivations that he tries to pass on to his son, thus making their unit driven by these norms and beliefs.

The man and the boy follow a moral code that makes them the "good guys" and thus separate from the "bad guys" – those who eat human flesh. This code is connected to carrying the fire. Even though fire is an essential part of the world's destruction, it is also a tool for survival, and even the basic stone of civilisation (Wielenberg 2010, 3). From this point of view, carrying the fire symbolises being good and believing in goodness. This faith brings comfort in the desperate times the duo is facing and keeps them in motion, not allowing them to give up on life, which is something the mother was not capable of and submitted to the dreadful fears of the upcoming. The father's faith, however, is not always based on rational thinking and what is more, he himself struggles multiple times to meet his moral standards, as Wielenberg (7) argues:

> […] man's struggle to be a good guy stems from the slippery-slope problem: sometimes it is morally permissible to violate the code of the good guys, but recognizing this can lead one into impermissible violations.

Such uneasy situations put faith in goodness and the chance of survival into an intense conflict. The moral code itself is not always possible to follow, and yet it represents the fundamental core value that is believed (at least by the man the boy) to keep one human. These inner battles of the man are present at the moment where he must decide what to do with the thief who had robbed them earlier or whether to provide another survivor with food. Besides the father's obvious moral clash, the boy's behaviour and reactions to such actions need to be taken into consideration – the boy suffers greatly when faced with moments that are, from the moral point of view, flawed, or unjust. But is it immoral to rob a thief who previously intended to steal something from them? With the matter of day-to-day survival, the system of moral values tends to be put aside, which is something the boy cannot comprehend. Repeated words about the need to carry the fire can suddenly sound shallow and even put a crack in the duo's relationship which is crucial for both to continue on the road. To carry the fire means for the boy to be reassured (3) and it is something the *bad guys* do not do. For the father, it means to hope that nothing bad will happen to them, but is such hope real or is it another example of how the man's faith is irrational? In *The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's The Road*, Alan Noble (2011) explores how the father's faith in never-vanishing goodness and protection corresponds with Abraham who believes God will protect them even if it means sacrificing his own son (96). The same applies to the father when he claims: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (McCarthy 2006, 77).

Religion and faith in God are something that has a vast impact and influence on the man, providing him with a goal and motivation, making him carry the fire together with his son. The occurrence of faith during desperate times is not random, and there is an existing correlation, as Wielenberg (2010, 3) claims and argues that

"the most socially dysfunctional [nations] exhibit the highest levels of religiosity", thus hinting that exposure to misery possibly leads to finding solace in faith in God.

Existing only as a duo, the father and son represent a unit driven not only by the sole instinct of survival but one with its own strong system of belief (carrying the fire and being the *good guys*) consisting of core values connected to general morality, which is seen as one of the qualities crucial for humankind's survival (Hill 2018, 128).

Where the boy relies on his father, he seeks purpose in love for his kin (3) and hopes for eternal goodness either found somewhere in the world or within oneself. Even though the moral code is sometimes flawed, and it is debatable whether its existence of on its own is a sufficient argument for a functioning social unit, it is, together with the father-son bond, still, the pillarstone of the connection between two people who had not become dehumanized, and their interpersonal relation is a scarce remnant of the old world's once existing and reasonable society.

I Am Legend

Robert Neville also faces the challenge of finding motivation and life purpose. Being probably the last uninfected man on Earth, or at least in his country, he does not have to worry about ensuring of his companion's survival, but he worries and suffers from having no social bond with anyone at all. His fight with vampires is then joined by another one – a fight with social isolation. Clasen (2010, 320) observes how Matheson emphasizes the issue and consequences of social isolation, because, for individuals belonging to human society, the fear of isolation is both genuine and logical. Within the realm of the criminal justice system, solitary confinement is regarded as an exceptionally harsh punishment. The 2007 film adaptation portrays Robert's need for human contact via the video rental shop, where he meets with his

"friends" – dressed mannequins which he interacts with, and some of them even carry a name, substituting real neighbours:

> Good morning, Hank. I'm midway through the G's. Hey, who's the girl in…?
> Never mind. Hey, I'll see you in the morning (Lawrence 2007, 0:20:40).

It is up to discussion whether Neville persuades his research because of this social starvation since the result of finding a cure would result in going back to the old normal. His family would not return, but the rest of society would. Robert's motivation is not only to survive but to restore humanity. As goes for Will Smith's Neville, he is a virologist from the start, who is trying to find a cure even before his family dies. Film adaptation could imply his research is a sort of unspoken promise to his deceased wife and child, along with the quest to "light up the darkness" (Lawrence 2007, 1:17:21), giving this motivation a slightly higher, Christian-oriented purpose than the novel does.

The film adaptation explains his motivation and purpose through the work of singer Bob Marley, whose music can be heard repeatedly during the film. While Robert is explaining to Anna what Marley stood for, he is also explaining his own motivation to keep going:

> The people, who were trying to make this world worse… are not taking a day off. How can I? (Lawrence 2007, 1:17:10)

Heyes (2017, 12) comments on how Neville is connected to Marley on multiple levels, namely:

Just like Marley (a 'kind of virologist'), Neville (an actual virologist) has found an injectable cure for those who hide in the dark. The peaceful, multi-ethnic inhabitants of the survivor's colony are his legacy.

Again, the film's version Robert follows a higher purpose than the novel's, emphasizing the need for humanity's recovery rather than personal, racial-oriented hatred.

Neville is not spared from questioning his moral code either. The harsh conditions of his surroundings force him to fight his inner urges together with the hatred towards the vampires. The film adaptation takes these moral challenges away, building strictly a good (Robert) v evil (monsters) type of world. In the words of *The Road*, Will Smith's Neville can be considered as the "good guy" without exception.

Robert from the novel faces multiple dilemmas on his way. As Morelock (2018, 13) points out, Neville hates the vampires on one hand, and at the same time, he is capable of humanization as is seen in the example of his former friend, Ben Cortman. This makes his mindset quite ambivalent (11), he is not completely blinded by utter disgust, and by the end, he can also recognize the conscious beings in them. These moments illustrate quite well his later mind shift, starting with initial denial: "There was no union among them. Their need was their only motivation" (Matheson 1954, 11). Robert thinks this way at the beginning, slowly transitioning into his own inner polemic about the questionable nature of the vampires:

He was anthema [vampire] and still remains anthema. Society hates him without ration. But are his needs any more shocking of other animals and men? Are his deeds more outrageous than the deeds of the parent who drained the spirit from his child? The vampire may foster quickened heartbeats and

levitated hair. But is he worse than the parent who gave to society a neurotic child who became a politician? Is he worse than the manufacturer who set up belated foundations with the money he made by handing bombs and guns to suicidal nationalist? Is he worse than the distiller who gave bastardized grain juice to stultify further the brains of those who, sober, were incapable of a progressive thought? (Nay, I apologize for this calumny; I nip the brew that feeds me). Is he worse, then, than the publisher who filled ubiquitous racks with lust and death wishes? Really, now, search your soul, lovie – is the vampire so bad? All he does is drink blood (20-21).

Even though encouraged by alcohol (which is another issue for Neville facing the lonely world), this vast thought process declares his ambivalent attitude. Morelock (2018) adds to this by commenting on the struggles Robert has with self-identification with a woman, even though she looks almost the same as him (11). Yet he must fight the urge of sexual attraction towards some of the vampire women (11), which even pushes him to the point where he must stop himself from raping her:

He took the woman from her bed, pretending not to notice the question posed in his mind: Why do you always experiment on women? He didn't care to admit that the interference had any validity. She just happened to be the first one he'd come across, that was all. What about the man in the living room, though? For God's sake! He flared back. I'm not going to rape the woman! (Matheson 1954, 49)

The film adaptation from 2007 does not adapt this feature, but there is still a subtle reference to Robert's loneliness and perhaps sexual frustration as he checks out a

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woman mannequin in the video rental shop and then implies his interest in her as he talks to the fake cashier, even though he just pretends.

This horrifying dilemma would not be possible if Neville viewed the vampires only as non-human monsters. Within these inner conflicts, it is described what morality means to him in this new world:

> Once he might have termed it conscience. Now it was only annoyance. Morality, after all, had fallen with society. He was his own ethic (50).

Matheson explicitly states that with the collapse of society, its norms, ethics, and moral code collapse with it, putting the responsibility and recognition of good and bad on the individuals who remain, which parallels the personal code of the father and son from *The Road* – Carry the fire.

In his article, *Fixing Ground Zero: Race and Religion in Francis Lawrence's I Am Legend*, Heyes (2017) discusses how Matheson and Lawrence differ in the way they portray religion and its role in Neville's (humanity's) life, which is another important shaping factor for society. In the novel, Robert, among his challenges with the research and fight with the vampires, faces a struggle to find something reaching *beyond* material existence, beyond himself (1). This journey does not end with his acceptance of faith or its finding, it rather displays Christianity as just one of the common society's practices, not so different from other traditions, putting them on an equal level and pointing out their subjectivity (4).

Lawrence's take on religion, however, dives deeper into the issue of Robert's struggle to believe in something greater. When Anna tells him that it was the voice of

God that told her about the surviving colony and Neville, he rejects this idea completely: "My God." "God didn't do this, Anna. We did" (Lawrence 2007, 1:13:53), and later denies God's existence completely:

> But something told to turn on the radio. Something told me to come here.
> My voice on the radio told you to come here, Anna.
> […]
> Neville, the world is quitter now. You just have to listen. If we listen…we can hear God's plan.
> God's plan? Alright, let me tell you about your God's plan. There were 6 billion people on Earth when the infection hit. KV had a 90 percent kill rate. That's 5.4 billion dead. Crashed and bled out, dead. Less than 1 percent immunity. That left 12 million healthy people like you, me and Ethan. The other 588 million turned into your Darkseekers. And then they got hungry. And they killed and fed on everybody. Everybody! Every single person that you or I have ever known is dead! Dead! There is no God. There is no God (1:19:00).

In his final moments, Robert tells Anna that he is "listening", confessing that there is something greater than himself, after all. He does so after he sees a butterfly in the cracked glass wall, a symbol of his dead daughter Marley. His sacrifice and legacy are part of the "film's message of God's enduring love" (Heyes 2017, 10), taking away completely the message of the novel, which deals with the inner struggle of "old society's" member to accept a new era, whereas the 2007 adaptation transformers it into a matter of Christianity.

I Am Legend and *The Road* novels differ greatly in the impact of religion on one's and society's life. *The Road* introduces faith as a fundamental and key instrument of survival, a source of motivation, whilst *I Am Legend* does not suggest this, religion is seen only as a traditional feature of society. The 2007 film adaptation, however,

rejects its original message and promotes the power of Christian God on a similar level to *The Road*.

Described factors and characteristics were all connected to the protagonists of the novels, which, due to used focalisation, are considered as the relevant samples for analysis, however, in *I Am Legend*, Matheson introduces a major group that is later revealed as the new society – the vampires. This sudden shift changes a lot, most profoundly the nature of the vampires, which was considered mindless, cruel, and inhumane until the end of the novel. Acknowledging their "humanity" in the sense of forming a new society, what is their purpose in this world?

There is not enough in-text material to be found, but Ruth comments on the state of this vampire society and gives at least some general hints:

> 'New societies are always primitive,' she answered. 'You should know that. In a way we're like a revolutionary group – repossessing society by violence. It's inevitable. Violence is no stranger to you. You've killed. Many times.'
>
> 'Only to… to survive.'
>
> 'That's exactly why we're killing,' she said calmly. 'To survive' (Matheson 1954, 156).

Ruth openly admits that this new society uses violence as their main tool to establish its position in the world but does not forget to remind Neville that he is no different, killing to survive. Matheson then offers a new take on the social polarization – he suggests the possibility of reconstruction after the apocalypse, but perhaps in a form (new species) that would not be expected – with the members of old society vanishing and dying. McCarthy does not seem to imply such an option, giving his novel a darker tone in terms of the possibility of humanity's restoration.

3.4   The Monster Within

When facing society's collapse or apocalypse, a large number of today's pop culture tends to construct some kind of a culprit, someone or something to blame and demonize. Both *The Road* and *I Am Legend* (except for its 2007 adaptation) oppose this common approach and transform the problematic issue of the concept of "monstrosity" present in these post-apocalyptic worlds, but each in its own manner, even though one element is shared by both – the danger of the monsters hidden within humans. With technology and science advancing throughout history, the animalistic side of humans became a feature to rise above, and not to embody. However, animality *is* something to be aware of, as it is a part of human biology and essence and controlled a significant part of society's behaviour (Mazis 2007, 126). When the advanced world restarts and returns to its roots, does the same apply to human behaviour? This final chapter, *The Monster Within*, seeks to explore this side of disintegrated society and analyse its displays on a daily basis.

The Road

> On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they
> have taken with them the world (McCarthy 2006, 32).

The Road can be viewed as a non-standard post-apocalyptic novel in terms of its approach toward rising inner monstrosity after the apocalypse. The genre itself often includes numerous visions of inhuman creatures, and horrific beasts that represent the main threat of the new world, and, in many cases, are responsible for the civilisation's decline and define the new conditions the survivors must live under. This is not the case in *The Road*. Stephen Joyce (2016) and his *The Double Death of Humanity in*

Cormac McCarthy's The Road summarise the issue of monstrosity present in this novel as follows:

> The post-apocalyptic genre is commonly peopled with not-quite human creatures, but these can be seen as gestures towards the disturbing suggestion in *The Road* that the survivors of the apocalypse will no longer be human because what we mean by "human" is a construct of our civilization and once that civilization is gone so too will all the innate morality we like to ascribe to ourselves (10).

This suggests that the annihilation comes from within the human itself, making the tragedy of the collapsed society even greater.

3.4.1.1 Social anxieties in the light of collapsing order and disintegrating structures *The Road*

Apart from the duo of the son and his father, the world of *The Road* is inhabited either by random sole survivors or by groups that tend to evince social bonds, provided that society is understood as a group of people with common interests, shared territory and traditions. The particularity about these groups is that their companionship is based on violent behaviour, approach consisting of slavery, raping, murdering, or even eating people, children included. In other words, these are patterns of behaviour that are generally considered unacceptable and punishment-worthy. Nevertheless, this world lacks any form of justice system, it is the age of survival of the fittest.

With every day being a dangerous journey towards possible death or torture, protagonists try to overcome these threats and live on. Even the task of willingly staying alive and keeping going is difficult in itself.

> There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want? I don't care, the boy said, sobbing. I don't care (McCarthy 2006, 85).

The desperately needed motivation for the man and the boy is found in the task of carrying the fire, which offers at least some purpose of their otherwise miserable lives. But even with that, the horrors on the road shape the father and the son into "traumatized protagonists" (Bueno 2019, 74), into victims of the collapsed order and disintegrating social structures, either family-tied or larger. Bueno analysis this issue further, and describes the pivotal role of trauma in *The Road* as follows:

> We can find at least two different types of trauma in the novel: on the one hand, the father and the son—and, we could say, every survivor of the catastrophe—suffer from individual or psychological trauma. On the other hand, the catastrophe has given rise to a collective trauma (76).

This collective trauma seems to be one of the base stones of this barely existing society of survivors, pushing them in directions that can slightly vary, but still lead to rather tragic outcomes: on the road but constantly in fear (the man and the boy), empowered parties but striped from humanity (cannibals) or solo survivors simply waiting for death. These three outcomes characterise the social polarization present in McCarthy's novel.

The final question, however, arises over the nature of hope as a means of survival and carrying the fire in the light of the trauma, and that is: Is the task of carrying the fire something ever-present, and, eventually, helps with coping with anxieties, or is it just a result of the trauma itself?

I Am Legend

Being the last one from own race is a menacing idea since it is tied to living alone, with no associates. Neville, as well as the characters from *The Road*, is going through trauma of its own. According to Hawkley and Capitanio (2015), there is a significant difference between transient feelings of loneliness that pass and are experienced by most of society and their possible aversive consequences like sadness and anxiety (2), which can be devastating for one's life. Furthermore, Robert is not just temporally lonely, he is isolated from all human contact, with the depressive knowledge of the low probability of ever meeting someone to reconnect with on a deeper level. His social anxiety is probably the reason why is he so persistent in keeping Ruth inside his house and suddenly open to more intimate contact despite the high probability of her being infected – the urge to reconnect is stronger than to annihilate the enemy.

Experiencing the traumatic grief over his dead family (Madani 2022, 54), Neville seeks solace in alcohol, music, and fighting vampires. The film version of Neville takes away the alcohol, again making this variation of him more "hero-appearing", but still keeps similar motives like the music (Bob Marley) and slaughtering the monsters. His coping mechanism is joined by installing several mannequins into an otherwise empty store, which he happily talks to and enjoys their company when he goes "shopping". It is a sad reminder of the trauma he as a solo survivor goes through, especially in the moving scene after losing Samantha, when Robert tries to approach a "woman" at the video rental:

I promised my friend…that I would say hello to you today. Hello. Hello. Please say hello to me. [crying and sobbing] Please say hello to me (Lawrence 2007, 0:58:37).

In that heartbreaking moment, Neville is portrayed as a broken desperate man, truly capturing the essence and tragedy of what it feels to be the last man, having to cope with a fate that is a nightmare scenario for the father from *The Road*.

3.4.1.2 The Monster Within
The Road

Apart from those who try to remain *human* and still respect some fundamental boundaries once common among pre-apocalypse society, the world of *The Road* consists of fractions that do not. The nature of these groups tends to be extremely violent and gruesome, abandoning all human restrictions, profoundly visible in the examples of cannibalism or raping and murdering children. The man calls them simply "the bad guys", whereas he considers himself and his son as the opposite, "the good guys".

'You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?' 'Yes.' He sat there cowled in the blanket. After a while he looked up. 'Are we still the good guys?' he said. 'Yes. We're still the good guys. And we always will be. Yes. We always will be' (McCarthy 2006, 77).

It may appear that McCarthy chose an oversimplified concept of good and evil, however, as it was previously discussed, his construction of the world is more complex than that, filled with moral dilemmas and tough decisions that lie upon the father's back, making the boy question their whole belief system. What is worse, the road for the protagonists ends with the father's death, the moral code is not rewarded in any

way and the world's only solace is located in stories and words – but who is going to soothe the boy now that the father, the one who raises through words and tells stories, is gone? It is no coincidence that in his final moments, the father reassures his son, saying he can always talk to him, even after his death. With that said, what does it mean for the bad guys? Survival may seem like the only goal that matters, but the cannibals endure significant consequences in the form of forever disconnecting themselves from human nature (Wielenberg 2010, 14), something the father managed to keep until the very end and pass on to his son, metaphorically killing and banishing the evil within, otherwise present in the lost souls of *The Road*.

I Am Legend

On the first look, *I Am Legend* seems like a more "typical" post-apocalyptic piece of work. Morelock (2018) explains the example of such a modern (zombie) story as "a transparent allegory about battling the other, with the healthy "us" killing, staving off, and possibly curing the infected "them" (3). After all, in *I Am Legend*, a survivor is fighting horrendous mutated monsters, their condition comes from a contagious virus and these monsters are responsible for social collapse. Instead of zombies, there are vampires, but they share their "walking dead" characteristics together with aggression towards people. In the words of Morelock, the idea of the healthy *us* killing *them* remains unchanged. Simultaneously, he admits that this is indeed *not* a representative of a modern zombie story, explaining it in two examples. The first one is the novel's final twist with the deconstruction of the trope *healthy us* against *them*, and the second one is a story with deeper meaning than just violence and the simple act of survival. It is a "tale of tribalism and moral ambivalence" (3).

The twist makes the novel non-conventional via focalisation, which does not suggest the monstrosity of the vampires should be questioned. The concepts of *good*

and *bad* are, however, challenged as it is revealed that Neville is the one with the monster within, the real boogeyman, slaughtering the vampires all along, never realising they are intelligent beings that suffer as much as him. Moreman (2012, 138) supports the same idea as he explains that Neville "instead ignores the similarity between vampire and human, opting to continue in his efforts to eradicate the Other". In the end, he has to pay the highest price for his actions, but still manages to self-reflect on the situation and understand this is no longer his world:

> And suddenly he thought, I'm the abnormal one now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man. Abruptly that realization joined with what he saw on their faces – awe, fear, shrinking horror – and he knew that they *were* afraid of him.
>
> […]
>
> Robert Neville looked over the new people of the earth. He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed. And, abruptly, the concept came, amusing to him even in his pain (Matheson 1954, 160).

In these final moments, Robert's journey reaches its climax, even though, for the whole time, it was falsely hinted it was the search for the cure or fighting the vampires, and not acknowledging them as the new society and himself as the bogeyman, the legend of the old race.

It could seem like for the vampires, there are no obstacles or challenges, but the existence of Neville, their hunter, proves otherwise. This "new society" is not immune to suffering or anxiety and must fight battles of its own. I have found only one scholar who pays attention to this factor, but I consider the vampires' point of view as one of

the keys to the novel's interpretation, as it gives some important details on the social struggles they go through. Nuttall (2015) notes on the clever and strategic use of linguistic tools and focalisation, which, on purpose, give only a limited amount of information on the realistic point of view or mind state of the vampires (2-3). Through manipulation of the words, the reader is led to feel emphatic for Neville, the vampires are portrayed as mutants with no union (Matheson 1954, 11). With this strategy, the final twist of the novel has the power and shock that it was intended to have, leaving several questions on what the challenges and fears of this new society are.

The only pieces of information on the state of vampires are the ones revealed by Ruth, one of their members. She points out the pain Robert has caused them, slaughtering their relatives, viewing them as mindless creatures, leaving them no other option than to execute him and finally start from a fresh beginning without the people from the old race, with no monster to be feared of – Robert Neville, the legend.

Ruth herself is a source of the details on what the vampires are or could be. Even though she admits her society is primitive and based on violence (Matheson 1954, 156), she shows a great deal of empathy and ability to feel all the emotions just like Robert:

> I'll try to save you. I'll tell them you're too well armed for us to attack now. Use the time I'm giving you, Robert!
>
> […] Forgive me for having to lie to you about so many things. But please believe this: When we were together in the darkness, close to each other, I wasn't spying on you. I was loving you (145).

This part of the letter displays the harsh truth about the vampires – that they are not indeed horrifying walking-dead monsters – they are as living and human as Neville is.

Who is the monster then? And is there any at all? Matheson constructed a post-apocalyptic world with no clear borders between good and evil, making it just as ambivalent as Neville is. The film adaptation rejects this concept and chooses a path where Robert is a Jesus-like saviour figure and the darkseekers evil beasts. There was, however, an alternative ending that did not make it to the final cut, which heavily implies the same message as the novel – the danger of perspective. It is up for further discussion why this version was not allowed as the film canon.

The concept of monstrosity does not have to follow only the pattern of the rate of aggression or the number of victims. The character of Neville is often interpreted as a racist white man, which suggests another point of view to look at him. As this passage from the overview on *I Am Legend* demonstrates,

> Neville has developed an idiosyncratic racist outlook: Regarding his own 'pure,' uncontaminated blood as the norm, those who deviate from it are considered dangerous and have to be killed (Schuller 2009, 85).

Robert indeed lacks almost any empathy for those he kills or experiments on, degrading the vampires to a lesser form of being, because he is the last man from the old "good" race. The film adaptation, again, takes a concept from the novel and utterly transforms it into a complete opposite. Shipley and Williams (2023) even describe Will Smith's Neville as a character that "has almost no connection to the original story and actually destroys much of its sociocultural significance" (99). Robert from the 2007 adaptation explains his actions on the example of Bob Marley, believing that with the help of music, he can "inject" goodness into people's veins and end racism, which functions as a metaphor for Neville finding a vaccine that could be injected in darkseekers and cure them from their condition (Heyes 2017, 12).

The Road and *I Am Legend* both point out the difficulty of defying the concepts of good and evil when society has collapsed. However, McCarthy's novel operates with the "good v bad guys" trope and thus suggests there *are* indeed factions that fit one or the other end of the spectrum of "goodness". *I Am Legend* uses a different approach and implies how such spectrum can mean nothing in a broken society, depending on what end of it one stands and looks from.

4 Conclusion

Post-apocalyptic narratives are characterised by their harsh conditions, either environmental or social. *The Road* and *I Am Legend* are no exception and, in this thesis, the aim was to analyse especially the social aspects of these fictional worlds since it represents an area of exploration that has not been properly studied yet.

During my analyses of both novels, I discovered that the issue and core of the social polarization reaches deeper than just in the structure of the newly formed groups and units. Specific behaviour, a system of moral norms and beliefs, or how the factions react to each other are all inseparable elements of polarization since they directly influence the way they are constructed or not.

One of the most prominent common features in both novels is the disintegration of family and eventually, the whole of society, which results in individual and collective trauma. These traumas and anxieties shape the experiences and actions of the characters, usually in a negative manner, like the father and his constant fight with distrust or fear of having to kill his son, or Robert Neville and the extermination of vampires which he is responsible for. The trauma does influence even protagonsits' enemies – all the deviants from *The Road* suffer from the same fate as they experienced the world collapse, but in their case, their coping mechanisms were not strong enough to stop them from submitting to a way of life which hardly resembles anything close to human. The vampires from *I Am Legend* experience social anxiety as well, as their newly formed society is fragile and constantly threatened by the legend from the old race, Robert Neville. Post-apocalyptic narratives, at least in this case, do not suggest a healthy way or option to stay the same as before the collapse, and even if there is an attempt to rebuild society, it is a deviation from the once-known norm.

The novels differ in the way they portray the spectrum of good and evil, even though in both, the morality theme is present and the code exists only in the eyes of the one who is executing it rather than among a community of people which would imply some attempt of social restoration. McCarthy creates protagonists that are capable of recognizing acceptable and unacceptable actions, whereas Matheson experiments more with the focalisation and the consequences of a restricted point of view as seen in his rebirth into a villain for the new society – the vampires.

This thesis presents an insight into two different visions of social polarization in the post-apocalyptic worlds of *The Road* and *I Am Legend* and depicts the similarities and differences between them. In the beginning, it might have seemed like *I Am Legend* was not an appropriate choice to work with because of the protagonist's state of solo survivor, however, the hidden existence of the new society (vampires) eventually proved otherwise, together with the parallel analysis of its film adaptation from 2007. *The Road* and *I Am Legend* dispose of complex characters whose motivations and challenges reflect the current cruel state of their destroyed worlds, and for both of them, the human need for genuine social bonding and belonging to someone is stronger than any other urge corrupted by the worst conditions imaginable.

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