



Narrative Closure in the Post-Apocalyptic Novels of Cormac McCarthy and Colson Whitehead: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

*This study explores the phenomenon of narrative closure in the post-apocalyptic novels of Cormac McCarthy and Colson Whitehead, namely *The Road* and *Zone One*. However, this study does not seek to find out whether there is narrative closure in the post-apocalyptic novels of these two novelists. It instead seeks to uncover the exact textual mechanisms that operate in such narratives to fashion or deny closure at the level of plot structure and show how these novelists subvert narrative closure to destabilize the re-invention of humanity to mount a critique on the liberal ideologies that shape the intellectual horizons of the early twenty-first century America that produced them.*

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المخلص

شهد القرن الحادي والعشرين المبكر زيادة ملحوظة في عدد الروايات والدراسات النقدية في مجال سرديات ما بعد نهاية العالم في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. وقد اعتبر ذلك مؤشراً على التزايد في القلق الثقافي الغربي حيال الأفق المظلمة لمستقبله. في الواقع، بدأت النبوءات الإنجيلية والتاريخية الألفية عن نهاية العالم تلقي ظلالها على الثقافة الغربية. لذا، فإن هذه الزيادة في عدد الروايات عن مابعد نهاية العالم تسجل لحظة من القلق التاريخي في المجتمع الأمريكي في القرن الواحد والعشرين. كنوع من الأدب الترفيهي، يُنتج هذه الروايات تقريباً آلياً وتُصعد للاستهلاك العام كروايات مثيرة، وهي علامات مهمة على المناخ الثقافي والفكري للمجتمع الأمريكي المعاصر. ومع ذلك، كان الاهتمام الشديد بسيناريوهات البقاء بعد الكارثة لدرجة أن الروائيين الأدبيين ذوو الشأن، مثل كورماك مكارثي وكولسون وايتهد، قد دمجوا هذا النوع من الأدب الترفيهي في رواياتهم الأكثر جدية. ولكن في أيديهم، يكتسب هذا الأدب الترفيهي المزيد من العمق والأصالة. كان هؤلاء الروائيون الأدبيون مبدعين لدرجة أن رواياتهم عن ما بعد نهاية العالم أصبحت أمثالاً للعصر يواجهون من خلالها انتقادات حادة للخطابات الثقافية للمجتمع الأمريكي المعاصر.

يحلل البحث كيف قام مكارثي وايتهد بتعديل الأنماط الجنرية المتلقاة للأدب الترفيهي المتعلق بما بعد نهاية العالم للتوجه بمثل هذه الانتقادات الثقافية. والمفتاح لهذا التحول الإبداعي، كما تفترض الرسالة، هو الطريقة التي قام بها هذان الروائيان بتحويل عنصر الإغلاق السردية والفرصة الثانية المرتبطة به لبدء الإنسانية من جديد والتي كانت جزءاً مستمراً من الأدب الترفيهي المتعلق بنهاية العالم. تنتبع الرسالة هذا الافتراض من خلال تحليل الإغلاق السردية في رواية الطريق لمكارثي ورواية المنطق رقم واحد لوايتهد.

المقدمة

1. Introduction

The past two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a boom in post-apocalyptic novels and movies. Many survival guides were published in this period, addressing various imagined life scenarios after an apocalyptic event. This boom is but a manifestation of a general mood that dominates the turn of the second millennium that civilization and capitalism are approaching what the title of Francis Fukuyama's famous book encapsulates as *The End of History and the Last Man*.

The post-apocalyptic novel is a genre of fiction deeply enmeshed in the cultural dynamics of the consumer ethos of late twentieth-century capitalist society. This genre is, therefore, a faithful mirror of the mentality and psychology of this society. The recent boom in this genre attests to the sense of doom and finality that dominates the mindset of this society.

In her pioneering study, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* (2010), Claire P. Curtis provides the following tentative definitions of post-apocalyptic fiction:

I define postapocalyptic fiction as any account that takes up how humans start over after the end of life on Earth as we understand it. The apocalyptic event or events cause a radical shift in the primary conditions of human life; it does not require the destruction of all humans or even the destruction of all potential conditions of human life. (5)

She stresses that the most prominent feature of post-apocalyptic fiction is “the focus is on the starting over” (6). This is usually cast as a return to a state of nature into which the surviving humanity can re-invent itself anew. She also finds “a kind of fictional realism to the postapocalyptic account” because it takes the reader “from where we are now to a place where we can easily imagine being. It then uses that space to think about how it is we want to live” (6).

The contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, according to Diletta De Cristofaro (18-19), seeks to foster readers' agency to shape a future beyond the apocalyptic narrative model, challenging the end's epistemic primacy. The critical temporalities of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel promote agency and freedom by removing the catastrophic foundations of the modern world and power structures. Second, by emphasizing the contractedness of the world. Third, by discrediting the deterministic and teleological narrative structure that establishes this model of apocalyptic history. These stories challenge us to reconsider how we think about narrative and history by presenting us with alternate scenarios. The contemporary post-apocalyptic novel's critical temporalities undermine the apocalyptic narrative's motif of the conjunction of meaning and ending, which is present in its professed concept of history and narrative techniques. In the present post-apocalyptic dystopian situations, they do not provide utopian rebirth or significance, even when they are situated after the end (De Cristofaro 19). There is an emphasis on the constructiveness of the sense of an ending and the apocalyptic history it sustains, as in Douglas Coupland's post-human narrative *Player One* (2010) and Sam Taylor's imagined apocalypse *The Island at the End of the World* (2009); and, more broadly, narrative endings that resist closure, reflecting the openness of time as lived space (De Cristofaro 20).

The post-apocalyptic fiction is set in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event. Consequently, its nature depends on the two common understandings of the apocalypse: the popular and the traditional one. In the first one, the word indicates the sense associated with events like destruction and chaos that lead to the world's end. On the other hand, the second (traditional) apocalypse is concerned with the end of the world and revealing a new one that gives meaning to the events that preceded it (Curtis 6). This means that the post-apocalypse mixes secular and divine elements to shape a human vision of how the world as we know it shall end.

However, the post-apocalyptic novel is a genre fiction in that it is fiction written according to specific fixed rules and conventions and produced to be consumed for sensational ends. However, what happens when such genre fiction is practiced by high-brow literary novelists such as Cormac McCarthy (1933-2023) and Colson Whitehead (1969-)? The results are going to be creative because such novelists would not accept to be mere practitioners of fixed conventions. These two novelists wrote one post-apocalyptic novel that creatively defied the genre's norms. McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Whitehead's *Zone One* (2009) incorporate the received conventions of the genre but are far more profound than anything the genre fiction of post-apocalyptic novels has ever produced. These two novels subvert the notion of narrative closure, so central to the genre fiction of post-apocalyptic novel, to turn the very narrative structure of the post-apocalyptic novel into a critique of the genre and the very ideologies of the early twenty-first century America that fashioned such novels.

2. Narrative Closure

Narrative closure is not to be confused with the ending of a narrative work. Endings are mandatory, whereas closure is optional. A narrative should end but should not necessarily

have a closure. All narratives must stop at one point or another, but the plot may or may not come to a final point of concluding its events.

According to Gerald Prince, narrative closure is "a conclusion giving the feeling that a narrative or a narrative sequence has come to an end and providing it with an ultimate unity and coherence, an end creating in the receiver a feeling of appropriate completion and finality" (61).

This definition highlights the following points about narrative closure:

1. Narrative closure is different from the ending of narratives. All narratives, with no exception whatever, come to a point of termination when the narrative voice is silenced. This is ending correctly. On the other hand, narrative closure is optional since it is an organic part of narrative structure and pertains to the fate of fictional characters in the story. It is an optional plot component since its presence and absence are equally significant in creating a narrative meaning pattern. When a narrative comes to a close, epistemologically speaking, a pattern of meaning is created. Peter Brooker speaks to this effect when he states that narrative closure "suggests not simply that texts come to a literal physical close but that their formal design or narrative movement constructs a position for the reader that reinforces a dominant view of the world or ideology" (41).

2. The effect of the imposition of a closure on the narrative materializes on the reader's part. Prince describes narrative closure as a 'feeling' in the sense that narrative closure falls properly in the domain of the reader's response. It pertains to the reader's ability to process the narrative cognitively to the point of self-satisfaction in the sublime of finality. Thus, H. Porter Abbott contends that narrative closure "involves a broad range of expectations and uncertainties that arise during a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close" (53). Closure is a 'desire' that obsesses the reader in search of satisfaction of his expectations. This conceptualization of narrative closure as desire provides an insight into the author-reader nexus as authors deliberately play on satisfying or frustrating this desire as part of their textual politics.

However, this 'feeling' of 'finality' is less cathartic than epistemological because narrative closure is not basically about the fate of the fictional characters in the narrative as much as about bringing the reader, quite unconsciously, to the point that the story has come to an end even before coming to the final closing words or scenes in the given work. Prince aptly uses the word 'conclusion' in defining the essential nature of narrative closure because it concludes events and interactions in a plot structure rather than ending texts. Hence, narrative closure is a structure property, whereas ending is a textual property.

3. The word 'finality' in this definition is ambivalent because, on the narratological level, it signifies completion, whereas, on the level of the reader's response, it connotes saturation. In the first level, closure completes a pattern of meaning in the given narrative, but this narrative is not yet closed, Narratologically speaking. This conception of narrative closure is attendant to authorial intentions, and it affords space for further narrative complication and development. Saturation more accurately captures the essence of 'finality' as it operates on the three axes of the narrative, reader, and author since narrative complication can never exceed the limits of logic, space, and suspense. Narrative saturation marks the point where narrative progress becomes impossible because the story has exhausted all possibilities of plot complications, and the reader has lost interest in it. At this point, authors cannot simply quit narration and leave things hanging loose.

Typically, narrative closure does not pose a problem in post-apocalyptic fiction because this genre is written almost mechanically according to a specific formula. In such fiction,

survival after an apocalyptic event leads to a new start for humanity. This new start or re-birth constitutes a narrative closure. So, narrative closure is an organic part of the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction (Curtis 24). However, things are crucially different when the genre is in the hands of major literary novelists like Cormac McCarthy and Colson Whitehead.

Such novelists never practice this genre mechanically. They prefer to play with the genre's received conventions to invest the post-apocalyptic narrative with deeper patterns of meaning and significance. These two novelists, in particular, play on the reader's expectations of narrative closure, a fixed aspect of the post-apocalyptic novel as a genre fiction. Such fiction has a fixed narrative structure that consists of survival in the aftermath of an apocalypse and the success of the survivors to re-invent humanity once again. This makes narrative closure a must to bring about such re-invention. McCarthy and Whitehead subvert this closure to destabilize the dynamics of re-invention.

3. Critical Studies on narrative Closure in *The Road* and *zone One*

Critical literature on *The Road* and *Zone One* examines these novels' endings rather than narrative closure. Most of the writings on *The Road*, in particular, find the ending of the novel problematic, if not ambiguous, because of the coda that McCarthy adds to the ending of the novel's action. Almost all these writings seek to explain whether this ending is optimistic or pessimistic in terms of the survival of the human race. Thus, Sean Hermanson, in his essay "The End of *The Road*," states that critics were busy justifying this coda as an affirmative of hope or a lamentation, ignoring the actual ending of the action proper (1). However, by focusing on endings rather than narrative closure, critics were exclusively focusing on the message of the novel rather than the technicalities of its plot construction or generic conventions. The same applies to the case of *Zone One* but to a lesser extent. Even those critics who were explicitly dealing with narrative closure in this novel, chiefly Leif Sorenson in his essay "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," take closure to mean ending. Thus, the phrase 'problem of the ending' frequently concerns the narrative closure in *Zone One*. However, the case of *Zone One* has a further complication that shadows the critical exploration of the resolution of the novel's action. This is the novel's heavily 'politicized' readings that see it as a racial parable on early twenty-first century American society. So, critics were reading the novel's ending not in search of closure but to bring their politicized readings into full culmination by the novel's end. Andrew Hoberek (2012) reads the ending of *Zone One* as affective of radical politics when he states that the ending of the novel betrays traces of the "utopian side of the zombie story [that] sees the breakdown of our categories of the individual and even the human not as a tragedy but as a form of release" (412).

In his article *Negative Strategies and World Disruption in Postapocalyptic Fiction* Marco Caracciolo examines the difficulty of describing catastrophe in postapocalyptic literature, notably in three modern books of formal and artistic sophistication: McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), *Zone One* (2011), and *Station Eleven* (2016). 2014. These books use "negative strategies" to convey the interrupted temporality of catastrophe. These formal tactics use negation's psychological structure to show readers the preapocalyptic world's absence. His textual studies aim to understand how the imbrication of human and nonhuman realities affects narrative thematically and formally. Catastrophe is an extreme world disruption since it deviates from the norm. Catastrophe is, therefore, fruitful and narrative-challenging. Catastrophe can inspire many stories, both fictional and nonfictional. The Epic of Gilgamesh, Genesis, and Greek mythology focus on natural calamities and their effects. In these traditional myths, catastrophe results from divine involvement in human history. Nowadays,

catastrophes are usually attributed to a complex causality involving human and nonhuman elements. The narrative faces a significant issue. Storytelling favors protagonists and the spatiotemporal context of human experience. Modern catastrophe, contrasting premodern catastrophe as divine intervention, negates intentionality. The plot is tied to human or human-like intentionality. Postapocalyptic fiction challenges narrative systems by capturing devastation. Caracciolo's case studies in this article rely on culturally circulating postapocalyptic myths to explore the divide between human cultures and geological or climatological processes. According to Kate Rigby, these more sophisticated narratives can reveal "the entanglement—material, but potentially also moral—of human and nonhuman actors and factors in the etiology, unfolding, and aftermath of catastrophes that turn out to straddle the dubious nature-culture divide" (Qtd. in Caracciolo 238)

Caracciolo examines three novels that use negative techniques to contrast the storyworld's pre- and post-catastrophic phases. In order to convey this temporally dyadic structure, the author uses negation to elevate it to a format principle: it underlies the enumeration of objects no longer in existence and frequent chapter-length flashbacks to the pre-world (Station Eleven); it inspires McCarthy's spatial description in *The Road*, with its gray landscapes and bare environments; and it shapes the protagonist's inability to bring satisfying narrative resolution. These harmful methods convey a sense of the pre-absence, the world's making these stories haunting (Caracciolo 238).

Majeed Jadwe offered another study that tackled narrative closure under the title *Narrative Closure and Genre Expectations in Cormac McCarthy's The Road*. In this paper, the discussion was about the problematic ending of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, published in 2006. There are two possible endings to the book. The second ending is a brief paragraph that completely contrasts with the first in terms of tone and point of view: "This 'second' ending does not only thwart any sense of narrative closure that the 'first' ending might aspire to achieve, but it also goes counter to the genre expectations of this novel" (Jadwe 103). The novel's original ending. While this component of *The Road* has been the subject of much critical debate and inquiry, no definitive or satisfying interpretations have been proposed as of yet. It begins with the novel's unconventional second ending, which deviates from the norms of the genre, and argues that it successfully concludes the novel's subversive story.

"The End of *The Road*," a paper by Sean Hermanson, examines the novel's last paragraph. Hermanson claimed that the last paragraph is full of mystery that could be interpreted differently, which results in closing the novel happily, "here I offer a new interpretation, which attempts to dispel its "torturous ambiguity" and reveal a surprisingly optimistic denouement (Hermanson 1).

Leif Sorensen's "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*" reads *Zone One* as a metafictional critique of apocalyptic narrative, in particular resolutions. Contemporary American writers have difficulty finding a satisfying conclusion because of historical uncertainty. This is where uncertainty is planted from political, economic, and human order instability. "What will follow next is more inconceivable for American citizens," Samuel Cohen put it (186). As Eugene Thacker puts it, "[t]he world is increasingly unfathomable" (1). The ability to visualize and simulate the future remains. Whitehead set a tale about zombies in this unsettling time and place. The zombies created by Whitehead represent the grim future of *Zone One* (Sorensen 2).

Finally, in an article titled "Zombie Plague and Post Disaster Reconstruction under the Post-Apocalypse Novel *Zone One*," Haiyun Zhang (2020) suggests that *Zone One* provides narrative closure in terms of the plot mode that contemporary American post-apocalypse

novels adopt, which is the narrative structuring from the doomsday to the rebirth. This plot pattern culminates in establishing a future hope for the few who survived the apocalypse. Zhang firmly believes that "the plot setting of the novel *Zone One* is just in line with this" (20). Despite the very harsh realities the survivors face in the aftermath of the spread of the virus, they do their best to re-establish the human community and defend it. Zhang tries to fit Spitz's final heroic stand at the novel's close as an extension of this plot mode. "So, in the end," states Zhang, "he chose to "open the door" and walk out to face the fragmentary post-disaster world, to give his hearty help for the remaining human civilization to get reborn" (20). Zhang tries wrongly to show Spitz's last heroic stand as a sign of his awakening into doing something to secure such a future hope for the surviving community. This is a reading of a narrative closure that does not exist as Mark Spitz throws himself into one final hopeless situation. It might be a heroic stand, but still, it is hopeless. The situation is ambivalent as narrative closure is far beyond attainment.

Eventually, this concise literature review shows that fewer studies were produced on this topic due to its contemporaneity. Given its growing significance, more studies are expected to be published. It should be noted that almost all the critical studies, whether on closure in the post-apocalyptic novel or on the two novels under study, follow no theoretical model of narrative closure. Instead, they were written in the tradition of analytical-descriptive methodologies. In the researcher's opinion, this weakens the claim and results of the conducted analysis.

4. Narrative Closure in *The Road* and *Zone One*

The Road (2006) is Cormac McCarthy's only postapocalyptic novel. It is a post-apocalyptic story about a man and his young son traveling across a world devastated by some mega disaster whose nature remains enigmatic in the novel. Still, the reader may conclude that this is a nuclear apocalypse because of the novel's specific indications about air pollution. Love, survival, and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of unfathomable tragedy are some subjects this work delves into.

The ending of *The Road* is very confusing and complicated to understand. The end of the father and sons' journey did not offer a clear resolution about the destination or the resolution of the journey. Additionally, the final paragraph of the novel is considered as a violation of the line of the story, making the novel with two endings instead of one and creating a mystery for the readers who contemplate the coda lines at the end of the book:

Once, there were brook trouts 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. They were polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate 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. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy 241)

With this paragraph, McCarthy finished his novel, which seems, according to Majeed Jadwe, a deviation from the norms of the post-apocalyptic genre. Instead of creating a new beginning, the writer inserts that there is a functional intent for this change. Still, the final passage implied a deeper meaning that can only be grasped inside the apocalyptic genre. Thomas R. Schaub argues that "the world in its becoming" (241) indicates the future situation of the narrator rather than being in the authorial voice's immediate temporal context, which is deemed the narratological agency of the second ending. Jadwe argues that the son took the role of a storyteller instead of his father, and that was obvious through the future

perspective from which the last lines were told. Further, the phrase “one there were” adds a fairy-tale quality that strengthens the interpretation from a future perspective, consequently creating anti-closure (Jadwe 102). Other critics, like Ashly Kunsu, have different opinions. She sees that the second ending emphasizes the circularity of time, and the last paragraph denotes both the end and beginning of new life, associated with religious themes invoked by the notion of the breath of God and genesis (Jadwe 103-112).

Similarly, *Zone One* is Colson Whitehead's only postapocalyptic novel to date. It was published in 2011. In this novel, whitehead depicts the post-apocalyptic world in which characters fight to survive, and he skillfully portrays the details of past and present situations. The story starts after an unknown plague hits the world and turns most of the population in New York City into two types of zombies: the ‘skills, which represent the greater threat as they are faster and more aggressive in pursuit of living humans, and the “stragglers” which are slower and less aggressive ones. The novel is far more than just another story about the end of the world. It is unique and thought-provoking, which leads readers to contemplate the human psyche and revalue the depth of the challenges people face to avoid being transformed into zombie-like ones in the face of those challenges. Another point that distinguishes this novel is the perfect deep descriptions of the events, especially the past ones. The nostalgia adds a bittersweet impact during the story. It reveals the characters' past, especially the protagonist, Mark Spitz, who is one of the civilian sweeper's team responsible for clearing the area from the skies in Manhattan City.

In *Zone One*, the ending of Mark Spitz's story overlaps with the post-apocalypse story of the uninfected parts of America. In this sense, the ending of both stories can be located in part three, which bears the title "Sunday." In this part, the wall that fortifies New York against the zombies is breached:

When the wall fell, it fell quickly, as if it had been waiting for this moment, as if it had been created for the very instant of its failure. Barricades collapsed with haste once exposed for the riddled and rotten things they had always been. Beneath the facade of stability, they were as ethereal as the society that created them. All the feverish subroutines of his survival programs booted up for the first time in so long, and he located the flaw the instant before it expressed itself: there. (221).

After the breach of the protective wall, events developed dramatically. A zombie bites Spitz's friend and member of the Omega Sweeping Cell and quickly turns into a zombie. Spitz had to kill him and use his military gear to save Kaitlyn, the last member of the Omega Cell. However, he fails as zombies attack in vast numbers. When Spitz reaches the breached wall, he discovers a “sea of the dead” marching hungrily toward the now unprotected *zone one* (259). He is now aware that the survival chances of the community in *Zone One* are hopeless. The only option for Spitz to survive is to retreat and “move on to the next human settlement” and keep doing so until he cannot survive (257). A strong sense of doom hangs over the place, and Spitz, in a moment of horror, comes to accept that “[t]he world [is not] ending: it had ended, and now they were in the new place”; and it is with this in mind that he thinks “[f]uck it” and advances forward (257-259). The novel stops now, and the reader is not given any clue or information about Spitz's fate. The novel withholds information as to whether Spitz's last action is heroic or suicidal. This withholding makes the fate of humanity ambivalent because the failure of Spitz is the failure of humanity, as the novel comes to equate throughout its post-apocalyptic narrative. With this striking ambivalence, the novel stops short of narrative closure.

However, critical appreciations of the ending of *Zone One* tend to focus on Spitz's final act rather than on the absence of narrative closure. Almost all critical commentaries on Spitz's final act sought to read its ideological implications. For instance, Grace Heneks, in her article "The American Subplot: Colson Whitehead's Post-Racial Allegory in *Zone One*" (2018), describes Spitz's final decision as an act of "suicide by zombie hoard" brought about by "the irresolvable contradictions of racism in American life that are still present even after an apocalyptic event" (75). Such interpretations arise from the critical persistence to read the post-apocalypse in *Zone One* as a parable of 21st-century American racism and capitalism.

Technically, the denial of narrative closure seems to work in line with such 'politicized' readings of *Zone One* because the novel stops with this act of suicide or defiance rather than with the fate of Mark Spitz. Only such denial can bring such readings of the novel to a whole pattern of meaning. Leif Sorensen speaks to this effect in his seminal article on narrative closure in *Zone One*, "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's '*Zone One*.'" (2014) when he says that this denial of narrative closure is designed to get the reader to "question the deferral at the heart of futurism," which implies that Spitz, and indeed all the surviving humanity, "may have finally reached the end of the line" (590). So, this deliberate absence of narrative closure in *Zone One* is meant to mount a critique of the scenarios of the human future that are implicated heavily with the ideologies of the cultures that produce them.

5. The Comparison

McCarthy and Whitehead play on the reader's expectations by subverting narrative closure, a fixed generic convention of the post-apocalyptic novel. This is essentially a play on the genre expectations also in the sense that they systematically apply all the ways of the post-apocalyptic novel but stop short when they reach the end. They, instead, thwart the generic expectations to create a space for the historiographical anxiety that characterizes present-day American society. Early 21st-century Western culture is obsessed with a sense of fatality, which shows itself as a historiographical concern...the end of history is closing as capitalism is outliving itself. McCarthy and Whitehead's denial of closure is a denial of historical continuity and subversion of a moment of re-invention of the old cultural forms. In a sense, they re-inscribe this historical fatality in their very denial of closure.

However, how is such denial materialized in these two novels? Applying Noel Carroll's model of narrative closure was the first step to verify whether these two novels emerge or debunk closure. This model is unique among the few theoretical frameworks introduced by narratology and literary criticism. It is objective, systematic, and relies on a firm logical basis. Upon application, *The Road* and *Zone One* are conceptualized as erotetic narratives. These are narratives that the reader experiences through the hermeneutic process of posing questions and providing satisfactory answers to them. This requires the report to be realistic and involve the reader in its action. McCarthy and Whitehead took advantage of the adventure structure of the post-apocalyptic genre fiction to entice the reader into the action sequence and keep asking themselves about how this situation or that is going to end. This goes into question-answer cognitive structure. The narrative poses situations as questions to the reader, and the reader is caught in the dynamics of textual suspense, promoting eagerness in response. This eagerness can only be resolved if the narrative answers the questions it poses to the reader. Carroll puts these narrative-posed questions into two categories: Presiding macro-questions that run across history and give it its dramatic and cognitive unity, and micro-questions that are situational crises whose answers make up the presiding Maceo-

questions. Narrative closure materializes when these two types of questions are answered satisfactorily.

McCarthy and Whitehead capitalize on the survival question, typical of the post-apocalyptic fiction genre. They neatly break this presiding macro-question into smaller micro-questions that take the form of narrative situations in which the central characters face critical moments of survival. The reader processes such cases into questions that are soon answered when the characters escape danger. How many times do the father and son in *The Road* and Mark Spitz in *Zone One* face the danger of being trapped and consumed by the cannibals and the zombies, respectively? Such situations stimulate the reader to process them as questions of whether the characters can survive or perish. This generates in the reader a sense of anxiety and expectations. However, once the outcome of these dangerous situations is cleared, the reader's understanding of anxiety and expectations is quenched, only to be roused again in the upcoming cases. Thus, the post-apocalyptic narratives of these two novels become erotetic. Once all the micro-questions are consequential to the survival issue, discussing the presiding macro-question of survivability in both books is possible.

In a typical post-apocalyptic genre fiction, all goes well. All the micro-questions get their answers in the close escape of the survivors. The resulting presiding macro-questions would logically behave similarly as they, too, get their answer in the final survival of the central characters. However, the satisfactory solution to the presiding macro-question of survivability materializes into a new chance for humanity to start again. However, *The Road* and *Zone One* find good answers to the micro-questions regarding the close situations that the central characters survive but stop short of doing the same with the presiding macro-question of survivability. In *The Road*, the father dies at the end but hands the child to another more fit family to continue the road of survival, whereas, in *Zone One*, Mark Spitz is trapped at the end and decides to jump across a river of zombies with no chance to survive. Both novels stop short of saying whether the characters in question survived. This denial of closure is a denial of a new start.

This modification of the narrative structure of the classic post-apocalyptic genre fiction is the core of the politics of representation in *The Road* and *Zone One*. The subversion of narrative closure is a moment of ambivalence that acts as a resistance to both continuity and utter destruction of the human world. However, in both novels, the concern is not with human existence as much as with the cultural regime of the West itself, for what is being emphasized throughout the post-apocalyptic narratives is a world similar to that that existed before the apocalypse. In *The Road*, McCarthy presents us with a familiar present-day American scene with all its consumerism and spatial geography staples. In contrast, in *Zone One*, the whitehead's narrator notices that New York after the apocalypse is essentially the same as New York before. In this case, there is no need to end or restart this human world with a fixed point of narrative closure. The two novelists are making an insight into this world's cultural ethos but are ambivalent about their attitude to its continuity or erasure. Thus, by subverting the moment of narrative closure, they create a moment of historiographical anxiety about the futurity and the prospects of continuity.

Moreover, the infixation of a moment of narrative closure at the end of *The Road* and *Zone One* concerns genre expectations. In *The Road*, McCarthy uses the road narrative so common in American fiction since Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). In such reports, the journey on the road usually leads to Manifest Destiny, which traditionally sums up the ethos of America as a sure destination to a great national future. The subversion of narrative closure casts shadows on this Manifest Destiny at the end of the road. Similarly, in *Zone*

One, whitehead uses the zombie narrative to cast shadows on the national future in the context of accentuating capitalism. This generic impurity that results from the violation of the generic boundaries of the post-apocalyptic novel turns these two novels into parables of the futurity of American society in the twenty-first century.

Consequently, this generic fusion in *The Road* and *Zone One* affects the erotetic readability of the post-apocalyptic narratives unfolding in each. The road narrative helps stratify the novel into a linear narrative structure with frequently calculated adventures. Each adventure questions whether the father and child can manage to survive. The series of incidents across a recognizable present-day America compose the journey on the road to the coast. These are quickly processed by the reader into questions and answers and, by the end, are re-conceptualized as one presiding macro-question in which smaller micro-questions are connected through what Noel Carroll calls 'narrative connections' that are knots of causal linkages that operate to stratify the survivalist and road narratives into a semblance of consequentiality that leads to a point of closure.

The situation is more complicated than that in *The Road* because the narrative keeps moving backward and temporally between the apocalypse and post-apocalypse worlds. This is less linear and more disruptive of experiencing post-apocalyptic history as an erotetic narrative. However, the novel can still structure the reading experience into the question-answer stratification. However, the survivalist narrative figures more prominently here than in *The Road* because survival as a presiding macro-question is more accentuated towards the novel's end. Eventually, in both books, survival as the presiding macro-question succeeds in inscribing narrative closure but subverts it simultaneously to create a space where ontological anxieties of national futurity come to the fore.

6. Conclusion

McCarthy and Whitehead played on the reader's expectation of narrative structure in the classic post-apocalyptic fiction to empower this genre fiction with deep intellectual reflections on present-day America. The problematization of narrative closure is meant to problematize the utopian allegories of the new start. This, itself, represents a subversion of the cyclical model of history and the Western belief in a second strat as implicit in the Christian notion of the Second Coming. By doing this, *The Road* and *Zone One* textualize the historical and ontological anxieties of the American cultural psyche in the early twenty-first century.

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