



12-7-2015

# The Folks of the Post-Apocalypse: The Road, Religion, and Folklore Studies

Megan M. Toone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Toone, Megan M. (2015) "The Folks of the Post-Apocalypse: The Road, Religion, and Folklore Studies," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol8/iss2/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# *The Folks of the Post-Apocalypse*

*The Road, Religion, and Folklore Studies*

*Megan M. Toone*

The post-apocalyptic genre strips society of its physical and ideological constructions. For this reason, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios offer an opportunity to analyze the most basic and central aspects of society that remain after all else falls. The hallmarks of social ranking, cultural creations, societal customs, and physical structures that aid in defining individuals and groups are destroyed in the apocalypse. The post-apocalypse reduces these defining factors to their most basic forms while maintaining complexities. Post-apocalypses reveal insight into the center of society, the possibility of ethics in a post-apocalyptic world, and ideas about how people are able to live together. The post-apocalyptic genre explores an existence where all defining influences are gone and people must create new ways to define, connect, morally direct, and coexist. With the demolition of social construction, a new framework becomes necessary, one that allows for the base elements of society to be discussed without depending on the destroyed concepts and terms used by mass civilization that no longer apply to a post-apocalyptic world. Folklore, a study of the ever-adapting, unofficial aspects of cultural beliefs and communication within a given group, thus becomes necessary when analyzing apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic texts. Folklore by definition defies the official structures and the culture of the masses, making folklore especially pertinent

to the post-apocalyptic genre. When analyzing the revelatory aspect of the post-apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* through the folkloric lens of analysis, religion comes to the forefront, but religious folklore and folk belief rather than structured mass religion. The center of society—both in the world before the nuclear winter as well as in the shattered remains shown during the scope of the novel—proves to be religion, answering the questions posed by post-apocalyptic texts about the core of human civilization, how people unify and live together, and what, if anything, survives when all structure fails. Religion, particularly the reworked and unofficial aspects of religion, defines the relationships and identities of these post-apocalyptic people. Ultimately, the use of folklore in *The Road* interconnects literature, post-apocalyptic fiction, and folklore studies in academic conversation. *The Road* is a literary case study of folklore, a field not often associated with mass print media. Through this folkloric case study, *The Road* shows how religion sustains humanity, ethical action, and relationships, both in the nightmarish setting of the novel and in life outside its pages.

A discussion of religious folklore in the novel builds upon the religious analyses of many previous critics of *The Road*. Religion and religious ideas emanate from the novel (O'Connell 305–306). Aspects of the book resonate with religious ideas, such as the main characters being a father and son pair—alluding to God and Jesus Christ—along with their meeting a “prophet” and their emphasis on light. Lydia R. Cooper, like many of the other critics of the novel, focuses on these religious elements. She asserts the need for heroes and religion even after social structures fail. Cooper explains that a new post-apocalyptic hero and religious leader emerges in the form of the father. While these are valuable analyses, religious discussions of *The Road* benefit from a folkloric framework, because folklore studies, particularly religious folklore studies, offer “a lens through which religious experience as well as nonreligious experience can be investigated” (Danielson 53), and as William A. Wilson explains, folklore is “centrally and crucially important in our attempts to understand our own behavior and that of our fellow human beings” (415). Folklore helps explain and examine the unique nature of the characters and their groupings in *The Road*. With the religious overtones and references but lack of official doctrines, structures, and rituals in *The Road*, religious folklore in particular helps to explain actions and beliefs presented in the novel. Without the folkloric lens, there is no standard or structure that aptly applies to *The Road* because the

novel portrays a new world order with new needs and obligations for survival and connection.

In order to examine religion as a societal center using a folkloric lens, the revelatory nature of post-apocalypses must be established. Through post-apocalyptic literature's revelatory ability to strip society and reveal the underlying center, actions are contextualized within the adapted religion, and the relationship between the father and the son is explained. An apocalypse is "a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale; a cataclysm." Predating this modern definition of the word, from the 1100s to the early 1800s, "Apocalypse," with a capital initial, referred to "the 'revelation of future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos.'" Around the 1300s, this idea evolved into an "apocalypse" being "revelation or discourse" ("apocalypse, n"). Combining these two concepts of apocalypse, the idea emerges that an apocalypse, through its associated decimation of society, provides revelation. Revelation comes from sifting through the broken pieces of a destroyed world.

A significant part of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic revelation is the base ethics, or standards and morals to live by. In her discussion of apocalypses, Claire P. Curtis sees the questions of ethics and identity. All post-apocalyptic fiction begs the question, "Is there an ethics of the post-apocalypse?" (Rosen). The different needs and different standards of the post-apocalypse create different ethical parameters. What is and is not acceptable, the hierarchy of priorities, and the new issues of personal and group survival all change, so the ethics and needs change as well. The judgment and analysis of characters must reflect the revised ethics. The main characters of *The Road* adhere to a set of ethics based on their folk beliefs and the folkloric religion that connects them. Others in the novel do not adhere to these new standards of ethics, providing a stark difference between the father-son pair and the rest of the survivors. Post-apocalyptic fiction also reveals the basic ideas of how people can peacefully live together, a question that remains central to any society because it explains the purpose and possibility of that society (Rosen). A functioning and whole society would obfuscate such questions and any possible answer. Only in the wake of a destroyed society can such things be seen, or as it is stated in *The Road*, "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made" (274).

In this post-apocalyptic world, all concepts of formal or structured religion have perished with the other staples of society, bringing religious folklore into

the spotlight. Of the two main characters in the novel, only the father has any concept of organized religion and constructions of God—something he questions and must reconstruct during his journey with his son. The boy knows no structured religion because he knows no other world than the post-apocalyptic existence he lives in with his father. When both physical and societal structures are gone, hallmarks of religion like material culture and formal traditions cannot be leaned on. Folklore definitions of religion apply to *The Road* because the mass culture, including structured mass religion, that stands in opposition to folklore has gone. Religious folklore, even though it exists in conjunction with official religions and beliefs, can be reworked to accommodate the needs of the folk group even after “official” and “mass” religion has perished. Religion in folklore studies can be seen as the traditions and practices among a group that bind the group together, permit communication, and allow the ideas and beliefs (both official and unofficial) of the group to be perceived (Eliason; Danielson 45–70). There are countless variations of the idea of religion in folklore studies, but this seems to be the general trend.

The father and the son use folkloric religion to keep them together and form a folk group connected by their folklore, folk beliefs, and folk customs, which allows communication and the formation of shared values. The father-son pair receives strength from religious folklore of their folk group. This fundamental relationship endures in large part because of the shared belief and actions. Part of that belief is the way the father and son view each other and their mutual belief in one another. The father compares his son to angels and God. When literally lost in darkness, the father counts out his steps away from the boy, aiming to count his steps back. As he returns, he muses that the boy/god he is returning to is a “lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite” (15). The world and all the light it still possesses, both literal and figurative, center on the boy, as shown here when the father compares the boy to the stars. It is not simply the father-son relationship that keeps the pair together; it is the belief of goodness and godliness existent in the boy. This unofficial and nontraditional belief extends to the father’s sense that God—a constantly shifting entity that endures in the boy, who has retreated from the world, or still watches from afar—appointed him to care for the boy (77). This protection of the son and these feelings of “appointment” go beyond responsibility of parenthood. The boy “carries the fire,” giving their journey and coexistence purpose and worth. With the metaphorical fire of goodness and humanity dwindling among others of the human race, the man’s endeavor to protect the

boy also protects the divine fire. These shifting roles of the boy and the father who both take on the part of Savior, God, Prophet, Apostle, Survivor, Sacrifice, Goodness, Fire, and Light complicate traditional conceptions of religion as well as simple labels. They defy the set categorization of traditional religion, only using those remnants of constructed religion that pertain to their identities as a folk group. They are not simply “The Father” and “The Son,” but rather a new conceptualization of the divine, fundamental to their folkloric religion, which has adapted and will continue to adapt to the needs of the folk group. These new conceptualizations of religion encourage endurance, kinship, love, protection, and even hope between the pair whilst others in the world resort to eating their own children or giving up on life.

To reinforce their folk beliefs, the father and the son create and participate in evolving folk traditions. The ritualistic aspects of folk belief reinforce interconnectedness and provide symbols of meaning (Eliason). Many of these traditions echo customs of Christianity, but have different meanings than they had in the pre-apocalyptic world. They are repurposed, altered, rebuilt, and then acted out by the pair. Moments echoing Christian tradition surface throughout the novel. Each moment references Christianity, but has been transformed to fit the unique circumstances of the father and the son. For example, the father kneels in the ashes “like a penitent” as he coughs up blood and thinks of his wife (54). The father does not perform the act of penitence as he kneels in the ashes thinking about his wife; instead, his resolve, his feelings, and even his measured callousness are renewed as he uses the occasion to recenter on his son. Such actions resemble Christian ritual, but are repurposed to aid the folk group.

Another altered Christian-esque ritual in the novel is the repeated act of “sacrament.” The boy constantly makes the father partake of the food in a sort of pseudo-sacrament (23, 34). The boy extends this same sacrament to others on the road, as shown in the scene with Ely (163). The sacrament when practiced outside the pages of this novel, an ordinance representing the blood and body of Christ and by extension, his atonement and crucifixion, often connotes an eternal perspective. However, in *The Road*, the sacrament surrounds the temporal and the immediate. These isolated instances perpetuate the immediate physical survival of the partakers. The sacrament invites and extends the group’s folk religion to others, but it does not function in the same capacity as before the nuclear winter.

The multiple baptism-like scenes with the father and the son further illustrate the use and necessity of the altered religious rituals. The father washes/

baptizes the boy, and sometimes himself, on multiple occasions, including a cleansing in a waterfall and later in the ocean. One baptism of significance is after the shooting of the cannibal who went after the son:

When they'd eaten he took the boy out on the gravelbar below the bridge and he pushed away the thin shore ice with a stick and they knelt there while he washed the boy's face and his hair. The water was so cold the boy was crying. They moved down the gravel to find fresh water and he washed his hair again as well as he could and finally stopped because the boy was moaning with the cold of it. He dried him with the blanket, kneeling there in the glow of the light with the shadow of the bridge's understructure broken across the palisade of treetrunks beyond the creek. This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. (73-74)

When the two have returned to the fire, the man sees the boy staggering and is careful to not let the boy fall into the flames. As the two proceed to fall asleep together, the following is written: "he sat holding him while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. *All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them*" (74, emphasis added). While in Christianity, baptism often symbolizes becoming clean through Christ, repentance, and rebirth, within the father-son folk religion, baptism takes on altered meanings. The baptism does cleanse; it is a physical cleaning away of ash and grime that will continue to plague the two even after they wash. The boy specifically is already seen as holy and good, so his baptism is not an act of repentance and sanctification. It is the bodies of others, along with the remnants of destruction, that must be washed away each time they enter the water. As for rebirth, there is none; there is no other world to be reborn into, just like there is no renewal of plants, animals, and ecosystems in this post-apocalyptic world. Instead, the baptism functions as a separation from the "bad guys" and a renewal of being "human." Each of these instances resonates with elements of formal Christian tradition, but the meanings have changed and the ceremonies have been altered to fit the needs of the folk group. If one were to analyze these religious folk traditions and rituals without the folklore aspect, a different view of religion would be found, a view that would not entirely fit the situations and ideas of the father and the son.

The beliefs of the man and the boy define identity, providing an “us” and a “them” by which to guide their lives. The us/them and good/evil binaries are common in religion (God/Devil, Heaven/Hell, Jews/Gentiles, Believers/Non-believers, Light/Dark, etc). Since other structures have failed, such concepts of Christian religion and binaries of God/Devil come under extreme strain because of the universal devilry that seems to be “eating” away at humanity. A different but related us/them binary becomes necessary for the sake of identity and commitment. The father and the son seek out assurance and validation of their identity. A constant question asked by the little boy to the man involves whether or not they (the father and the son) are the “good guys.” One of the biggest identifying factors of the “good guys” is their lack of cannibalistic and heathen-like tendencies. As the novel progresses, the definitions of the “good guys” and the “bad guys” rounds out. The “bad guys” are the cannibals, the rapists, the murderers, and the individuals who act on survival instincts at the expense of others. Grotesque physical indicators also become associated with the bad guys, including the loss of limbs as seen by the “spatula”-like hand of the ousted commune cannibal who attempts to take everything from the boy and the father (255). The “good guys” stay human, sustain familial relationships, believe in and continue on with some sort of faith, and do not steal from others (an example being the bunker where the boy wants to make sure they are not taking anything from the other people) (145–146). The good guys perpetuate life (not killing others except under threat and even—a trait specific to the boy—giving food to others) and most importantly, “carry the fire.” This fire represents the goodness and hope at the center of their folk beliefs. The constant need for reassurance and definition about their status as “good guys” gives form to the group and later even allows for the joining with and communication between similar folk groups when the little boy meets up with the other “good guys” after his father dies (281–287). Religion and the us/them religious binary sustain the group and provide individuals with a purpose and a sense of self in the post-apocalyptic world.

The cannibal communes, with their inhumanity, stand in opposition to the father-son religious folk group in *The Road*. Regardless of the cannibalism and wickedness portrayed in the novel, religion remains at the center of the father-son folk group, especially seen in the religious belief the father and the son tie to each other. Society is portrayed as belief and faith centered. The cannibal communes roaming the landscape complicate this religious center. On the one hand, these groups can be seen as a religion all their own. Though vastly

different from the folk religions of the “good guys,” the “bad guys” still exhibit some of the same characteristics of a folk religion as the father and the son. The practices of eating, torturing, and raping human beings are their common goals. Survival is paramount in their ideological view. In these respects, the cannibal communes could be considered to have folkloric religious aspects; however, I would argue that these “bad guys,” regardless of any application of religious folklore to their inhumane lifestyle, function in the novel more like an antireligion or an absence of religion. The rejection of religion takes away the central points of connectedness, humanity, and faith left in the demolished world. The antireligion creates an even starker contrast between the good and the bad by showing the effects of the presence or absence of religion. The cannibal communes do not exhibit the same “goodness,” “fire,” or religious folklore, and thus do not display the same level of humanity. The cannibals are portrayed more like animals than humans. Survival instincts drive them to eat their own kind. They decide to satiate more than just survival needs by imprisoning, murdering, torturing, raping, and performing other inhumane acts. Their “traditions” create an alienating dynamic rather than a unifying force. Anyone can be killed or eaten at any time. They are organized and function together, but they are not unified (60–62). Rather, they use one another, abusing the “connections” with others in the group to continue living their animalistic existence. Each member of the commune represents a means to an end for the individual, not the group. The group will not be able to continue together for long because any semblance of unity is based on something unsustainable; their supply of humans to kill and eat will run out and so will they too run out as they pick each other off. They are inhuman as opposed to human, faithless as opposed to believing, fragilely put together as opposed to unified and bound. The extreme illustrations of inhuman cannibalism emphasize the power of religion to connect and center society.

There is no question that *The Road* is rife with religion, but to only see the religious tones while missing the “how” and the “why” of the religious presence is a missed opportunity. Analyzing *The Road* in this fashion also encourages the comingling of folklore studies and mass culture. The two resist intermixing, but genres such as the post-apocalyptic narrative provide a space for the two to merge. In this union, literature becomes a folkloric case study of humanity. *The Road* presents an explanation of how people can live together by taking out everything but that which is necessary for connections among people: the central, religious idea of goodness. *The Road* reveals the importance of this

folkloric idea of goodness through the constructed traditions and the sense of purpose of the pair. Religion allows members of society to share a common goal and communicate while simultaneously maintaining a sense of humanity and faith. Folkloric faith and religion becomes a standard not just for the characters in the book, but also for other societal structures outside the pages of the novel.

# Works Cited

- “apocalypse, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford UP, September 2014. Web. 1 October 2014.
- Danielson, Larry. “Religious Folklore.” *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*. Ed. Elliott Oring. Logan, UT: Utah State U P, 1993. 45–70. Print.
- Eliason, Eric. “Religious Studies.” *Studies in Folklore*. Brigham Young University, Provo. 23 September 2014. Class Lecture.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage, 2006. Print.
- O’Connell, Maria. “No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy.” *Studies in the Novel* 45.2 (2013): 305–06. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Rosen, E. K. “Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: ‘We’ll Not Go Home again.’” *Choice* 48.7 (2011): 1288. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Wilson, William A. “On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries.” *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*. Ed. Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2013. 415–33. Print.