

A Comparative Study of *The Road* and *Fahrenheit 451* from the Ecological Perspective

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Abstract: This thesis compares the ecological significance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Both novels are prophetic as they do not describe what happened in the past or what is happening now, but they are fictional about what might happen in the future. In both novels, there is a threat of survival. *The Road* is the threat of survival more in the physical world while *Fahrenheit 451* is more that of the spiritual world. Both novels concern the relationship between man and nature, man and man as well as man's spiritual world. These aspects show that these two novels are comparable. Through the comparative study, this thesis interprets the value and significance of these two novels from the ecological perspective. They not only warn against environmental destruction in the physical world and suggest harmonious coexistence of man and nature, but also imply the appeal for a safe and free world in the mind.

Keywords: *The Road*, *Fahrenheit 451*; ecological significance; man and nature; spiritual world

1. INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, published in 2006, won National Book Critics Circle Award and is acclaimed 'A New York Times Notable Book' and 'One of the Best Books of the Year' by *The Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Denver Post*, *The Kansa City Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York, People*, *Rocky Mountain News*, *Time*, *The Village Voice*, *The Washington Post*; and is praised by *The New York Times Book Review* 'Vivid, eloquent...*The Road* is the most readable of McCarthy's works, and consistently brilliant in its imagining of the posthumous condition of nature and civilization'; *Los Angeles Times* Book Review remarks it as 'One of McCarthy's best novels, probably his most moving and perhaps his most personal' These are printed on its back cover. Also on the back cover of *Fahrenheit 451*, which was first published in 1950, are these remarks: 'Frightening in its implications...Mr. Bradbury's account of this insane world, which bears many alarming resemblances to our own, is fascinating (*New York Times*)' and 'Ray Bradbury's internationally acclaimed novel *Fahrenheit 451* is a masterwork of twentieth-century literature set in a bleak, dystopian future.' Though there is an interval of more than fifty years between the publications of these two novels, they have shared in common many elements and are comparable: Both novels are prophetic as they do not describe what happened in the past or what is happening now, but they are fictional about what might happen in the future. They are labelled as 'Dystopian Work' as they limn a world unpleasant to live in. In both novels, there is a threat of survival. *The Road* is the threat of survival more in the physical world while *Fahrenheit 451* is more that of the spiritual world. Both novels touch upon the procreation of children and indifference between conjugal couples, the former is for the continuation of posterity while the latter seems against it. Both novels concern the relationship between man and nature, and they cover man's inner world as well, which is worth notice and study.

Scholars at home have studied *Fahrenheit 451* on its audio-visual center, its consumption Utopia, its symbols and

allusions. Tan Yanhong mentions *Fahrenheit 451* in her study of Dystopian works, but not in detail. Whereas the studies on *The Road* at home concern its Holy Grail Motif, its hopeless-to-hopeful end, its ethnic and morality, its narrative features, and its features of themes; Abroad, there are studies on types of crisis in this novel, its Intertextuality and the Worth of Textual Remembrance, Hardly any detailed study of the ecological significance has been made on these two novels, let alone a comparative study of them. A Chinese scholar suggests the classification of ecology into three fields: natural ecology which deals with the relationship between man and nature, social ecology which deals with the relationship between man and man, and spiritual ecology which concerns man's spiritual world (鲁枢元: 2011:44). I think this is quite reasonable and my thesis will give a close study of the ecological significance in them, to provide a reinforced and panoramic scope of the ecological concern in them, hoping to be of some help in the new interpretation of these two novels as well as in the arousing of ecological consciousness in reader's mind to build a harmonious world not only in nature but also in the society and man.

The ecological significance in *The Road* lies in the relationship between man and nature. It is reflected mainly in the revelation of a world in which nature confronts man. Nature ceases to yield fruits or fails to provide materials for the maintenance of man. Even the sun refuses to come out to give light and warmth to man. At night, the moon is invisible. By day, the sun is banished. (McCarthy: 2006:32) Day and night are hard to distinguish. 'Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before...Barren, silent, godless...The segments of road down there among the dead trees...The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop...This was not a safe place...the wasted country...Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds...Dust and ash everywhere...' (3-7). Here is presented a lifeless, barren world, a scene of a fin-de-siecle. The city, a mark of civilization, is ruined. '...the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust' (8-12). 'The only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash.' (24) Another symbol of civilization --- the fire doesn't exit, either. 'Where all was burnt to ash before them no fires were to be had and the nights were long and dark and cold beyond anything they'd yet encountered' (14) One more mark of life --- sound is also extinguished. 'No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees' (15). The air is polluted, 'grainy air' (20). Not only is it polluted, but it is poisonous, so the early refugees were 'wearing masks and goggles' (28). Even now father and son see some of the survivors 'wearing canister masks.' (60) The winds are ashy. 'The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void...(11). No birds are visible in the air. Even the rain contains soot. The water is contaminated, 'The standing water in the roadside ditches black with the runoff' (51). As a result, 'There is nothing in the lake' (20). In the earth, no crops or plants grow. The trees are falling. 'On the hillsides old crops dead and flattened...the pieced farmland still visible, everything dead to the root along the barren bottomlands' (21). 'the land was gullied and eroded and barren. The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes. Middens of anonymous trash...' (177). In a word, 'No sign of life'; (ditto). The world is devoid of birds and animals. No wonder 'On this road there are no godspoken men.' (32). Nature cannot protect them and feed them, 'Nowhere to build a fire. Nowhere safe' (186).

Fahrenheit 451 also concerns the relationship between man and nature, mainly reflected in the mental state of the major three characters: Montag, Clarisse and Mildred. Clarisse is a woman who loves nature and is engaged in

independent thought which is not allowed by the government. She understands nature and gets very close to nature. She is absorbed in nature, 'I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, because they never see them slowly...Bet I know something else you don't. There's dew on the grass in the morning' (Bradbury: 2012:6-7). She is sensitive to grass, flowers and other things in nature neglected by others. When he reaches the river and washes himself in it, he is changed. Nature changes his soul, 'The river was very real; it held him comfortably and gave him the time at last, the leisure, to consider this month,, this year, and a lifetime of years...He saw the moon low in the sky now...After a long time of floating on the land and a short time of floating in the river he knew why he must never burn again in his life' (134). He is cleansed by the river and decides to abdicate his profession of a fireman. He reaches the countryside and gets close to nature, 'Now, the dry smell of hay, the motion of the waters, made him think of sleeping in fresh hay in a lonely barn away from the loud highways, behind a quiet farmhouse, and under an ancient windmill that whirred like the sound of the passing years overhead. He lay in the high barn loft all night, listening to distant animals and insects and trees, the little motions and stirrings' (135). He enjoys 'the warm odors and sights of a complete country night peacefully and quietly, he is now far from the madding crowd and the hustle and bustle of the city. He is part of nature now, with plants and animals. From here we can see clearly the writer's ecological consciousness --- the peace and harmony of the country, or of nature, brings happiness and power and aesthetic pleasure as against unhappiness and agitation brought by the commotion of the city. In contrast with Montag and Clarisse, Mildred is a woman who is alienated from nature. She spends most of her leisure time in TV programs, that is, in commercial life. She is not happy. She relies on sleeping pills to get asleep, taking an overdose consciously or unconsciously. Man is not only a social being, he is first of all a natural being as he is part of nature, so separated from nature, how can he attain true happiness? As a Chinese scholar points out, only in the contact with the virgin nature can man get a strong, indispensable and irreplaceable pleasure and aesthetic feelings (王诺: 2003:66). Here we can see the power of nature and its strong influence on man.

While the importance of nature is reflected more positively in *Fahrenheit 451*, it is reflected negatively in *The Road*---disharmony between nature and man leads to the disharmony between man and man.

When father and son come across another man struck by lightning, they couldn't help him. 'We can't help him there's nothing to be done for him' (McCarthy: 2006:50). 'He's going to die. We can't share what we have or we'll die too' (52). Life now becomes a struggle for survival. In fact, they are not struggling. They just keep going, to be blessed by what they can find to eat. They can't find resources in nature to maintain their lives. They could only find what has remained after the cataclysm. Men not only kill themselves but also steal the others' belongs or rob others and even kill others when the latter pose a threat, as the father kills a man who endangers the boy. What is worse, they turn to eating themselves, as the father find bones, skins and a pool of guts.(71). Their cart is plundered and the boy's knapsack is gone. Brotherhood is out of question. When the boy sees a little boy, he wants his father to take him with them, but the father refuses to do. He can't afford to help others. Close to the end of the novel, they arrive at the beach. One day they walk along the beach and get back to see 'the tarp was gone. Their blankets. The water bottle and their campsite store of food. The sailcloth was blown up into the dunes. Their shoes were gone. He ran up through the swale of seaoats where he'd left the cart but the cart was gone. Everything...They took everything...'(253). The man decides to track down the thief or thieves by tracing the sand in the road. Finally they catch up with the perpetrator.

Fortunately there is only one thief, so the man makes the thief surrender and submit his knife, shoes, and clothes to them, leaves him standing in the road, nude and shivering. The boy cannot bear to see this and begins to cry. He begs his father not to kill the thief but help him. He is struck by the scared thief and worries about him. The father says they have to do this, otherwise it is them who will starve to death. The boy keeps sobbing all the time. 'He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die. He's going to die anyway. He's so scared, Papa. I'm scared. Do you understand?' (259). The father says, 'You are not the one who has to worry about everything.' The boy answers, 'Yes I am, I am the one' (ditto). Finally they come back to the place, but the man is gone. The man places back his clothes and shoes there. Under such gruesome circumstances, sympathy is out of the question, only antipathy and indifference remains. They cannot mind others' lives but their own. Not only are they robbed, but they are attacked for no reason. As they wheel their cart through a small port town, another deserted place, no one is in sight, but suddenly a man shoots an arrow at them. The father protects the boy with his own body and gets wounded in his leg. When the man tries to raise his bow again, the father fires at him with his flare pistol. For no reason they are attacked. The attacker himself is a victim, as the father later finds him in a corner of the stripped house with a woman helping him by. They are there, just waiting for death. He attacks the father out of malice or he might have thought the man would be his threat. In this aspect, *The Road* goes further. The disharmony between nature and man as well as the disharmony between man and man result in the overbalance between man's humanity and morality and it also causes disturbance in the individual's mind. When the reality that survival becomes a problem is so harsh, the man's wife couldn't accept. She feels they are the walking dead instead of survivors and she commits suicide. 'Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't' (56). Their fellows become their menace. To live becomes meaningless and she can only feel eternal nothingness, so she takes her own life. There is no argument. To argue is also meaningless. Philosophy becomes powerless and useless. Father and son start their journey without her. What they have seen and experienced has changed the little boy's mind greatly as he doesn't want to listen to stories any more. In the stories, he is told to help people, but in reality, they do not. Stories are supposed to be happy, but real life is far from that. When he is dying, he encourages his son to keep going and carry the fire. The boy doubts if there is fire. The father affirms that it is real inside the boy, always there (279).

The consciousness of the writer has become clear now. He makes us realize the dangers we are in and reflect on the roots of the dangers. From the context, we can infer these ecological crises come from a chemical war as plants and animals as well as men are burnt. And they come across military men on the road. They come across an army with tennis shoes tramping by and they hide themselves (91). War is too destructive and horrible. Chemical weapons made by man bring disaster to him. The writer warns us against these so as to bring back a world ecologically harmonious for man, plant and animals to coexist peacefully. This is implied by what is on the father's mind near his death. When he knows there is not much time left for him in the world, he often visions softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun (272). Throughout the novel, the writer implies the hope to carry on the fire lies in love, self-sacrifice and brotherhood. The boy is the fire carrier. He is protected and saved by his father at the risk of his own life. He dives into the cold sea to look for food on the ship for him, washes clothes for him; he parries the arrow at the boy with his own body; he would starve himself to save food and drinks for the boy, etc. so that the boy

survives. He survives not only because of the love between the father and his son, but because of love for and of their fellows. At the end of the novel, after his father is dead, the boy walks out to the road and someone is coming to him, a veteran with a shotgun. He invites the boy to go with him. After he is reassured that the man is one of the good guys and is not man eating, he complies. The boy joins the veteran's family --- his wife, his son and daughter about the same age of the boy. The woman gives him warmth and comfort. She tells him that 'the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time' (286). The hope for an ecological harmony is implied by the reminiscence of brook trout swimming in the streams in the mountains.

While *The Road* reflects problems more in natural ecology, *Fahrenheit 451* reflects problems in social ecology and spiritual ecology.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, problems in social ecology are reflected in the disharmony between the society and the individual, represented by the authority whose spokesman is Captain Beatty on the one hand and Montag, Clarisse, Mrs. Blake's neighbor, Faber and the book people on the other. Clarisse is a woman who loves nature and has independent thought. Such an individual is incompatible to the society and she is labeled as antisocial and she vanishes from the world. The novel implies she is run over by a group of teenagers. As for Mrs. Blake, she is burned because she refuses to be merged into a highly oppressive and uniformed society which doesn't allow books to be read or to be hoarded. To her, the books are as important as her own life, so she would rather choose death instead of being vanquished. Her death serves as kind of a martyr who defends justice and protests against persecution. Faber spends most of his life in hiding, because he also likes books. If he is discovered, he will suffer like the others. Yet he is unyielding as he does what he can to help Montag to rebel against the authority. Montag is an antagonist to the society. At first, he is on the side of Beatty, burning books for pleasure, but when Clarisse makes him realize he is not happy, he changes slowly from stealing books to be burnt, reading books secretly and hoarding books at home, to open confrontation with the government. He burns Captain Beatty and escapes with Faber's help and joins the book people safely. The book people are the social outcasts. They exiled themselves to avoid persecution because they love books and are fascinated by the thoughts and people in the books. They want to pass down the knowledge to their posterity.

The crisis of the spiritual ecology is reflected in the case of Beatty and those of Mildred and her friends. Captain Beatty, a spokesman for the authority, advocates unification and ban from books and reading, claiming that they burn books to keep peace of one's mind, to give people fun, to make them happy, and to provide them pleasure and titillation (Bradbury: 2012:56). In fact, he himself is not happy or he cannot find meaning in his life, so when Montag aims the flame thrower at him, he just stands there, without trying to save himself.(116). So it seems he wants to die and he does. Seemingly, they are happy, but in fact, they are not. How can they be? Man is part of nature, if he is away from nature, he is impossible to be happy. Their true nature is stifled. They are unified, 'they all say the same things and nobody says anything different from anyone else' (28). It is the same with Mildred. What she cares is only material things. She is commercialized by consumerist culture. She is devoid of sympathy and fellow feelings and even love for her husband. When Montag talks of the burnt woman to her, her response is: 'She's nothing to me; she shouldn't have had books. It was her responsibility, she should've thought of that. I hate her. She's got you going and next thing you know we'll be out, no house, no job, nothing' (48). To her, nothing is more important than material things, not even the problem of life and death. She is not happy, either, because she takes an overdose of sleeping pills. She comes back

to life after Montag calls for medical help. Her friends are of her sort. They spend most of their leisure time on TV programs and are incapable of thought, love and feeling. They think to have children is out of mind; those who have children treat them like washing clothes, 'No one in his right mind, the Good Lord knows, would have children!...I plunk the children in school nine days out of ten. I put up with them when they come home three days a month; it's not bad at all. You heave them into the 'parlor' and turn the switch. It's like washing clothes; stuff laundry in and slam the lid' (92-93). There is no communication with the children, no love or concern. When Montag insists on reading Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* to them, their numbness is disturbed and they cannot bear. They are all mechanized and are turned into marionettes. Living in the industrialized society, they are materialized, mechanized, unified and alienated which makes them lose their sense of responsibility, morality and unable to love. They are indifferent to others, as Mildred doesn't care even the death of her neighbor, Clarisse. She is indifferent to the woman burnt by her husband together with the books she hoards. She replies coldly that the latter is nothing to her. These people live in the waste land --- spiritual waste land, just as the contemporary American writer James Ridefield warns its citizens, 'people's concern for material life has become a paronia. They are indulged in the construction of material safety to substitute the spiritual security...now is the high time we should awake out of it to reflect seriously the fundamental problems' (鲁枢元: 2006:141).

In summary, ecological significance in these two novels are explicitly reflected in natural ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology. In the relationship between man and nature, ecological crisis is exhibited in *The Road* which results in the confrontation of nature and man. Man causes nature to be destroyed and it fails to yield fruit and to provide safe and warmth for him. We should know man and nature are interdependent and we should protect nature so that it can protect us in return. When nature is endangered and survival is a problem, man deteriorates in humanity and morality. *Fahrenheit 451* also shows the power of nature to man. It is the source of beauty and aesthetic feelings. Separated from nature, man is unlikely to attain happiness. In the aspect of social ecological significance, *The Road* tells us the disharmony between man and man results in the deterioration of relationship of man and man; if the highly developed science and technology is ill-used, there will produce disasters. *Fahrenheit 451* reflects that unified and mechanized by the highly oppressive society which is against individual thought, against book reading in a commercialized and highly technological society represented by the mechanical hound, advanced medical equipment, seashells, ear-thimbles, wall-TVs and so on, man is anesthetized and devoid of love, sympathy and empathy. These two novels complement each other and are conflated to combine a panoramic picture of consciousness of crisis in natural, social and spiritual ecology. These three aspects are closely related to each other and disharmony within each aspect will cause impact on the others. We should have an ecological society first to ensure an ecological natural world and a spiritual one. These two novels are both apocalyptic. They are warnings to the world against oppression of tyranny, problems of and disaster of chemical wars, restrictions and repression of individual thought as well as side effects of advanced science and technology, etc. and they imply an appeal for an ecologically harmonious world to live in.

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