

6-2012

# When Mountain meets Road: Mfankind's connection to nature through sublime theory in Shelley's Mont Blanc and McCarthy's The Road

Catherine Elliott

*Union College - Schenectady, NY*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Elliott, Catherine, "When Mountain meets Road: Mfankind's connection to nature through sublime theory in Shelley's Mont Blanc and McCarthy's The Road" (2012). *Honors Theses*. 805.

<https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses/805>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Union | Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Union | Digital Works. For more information, please contact [digitalworks@union.edu](mailto:digitalworks@union.edu).

When Mountain meets Road: Mankind's connection to nature through sublime theory in Shelley's  
*Mont Blanc* and McCarthy's *The Road*.

By

Catherine Elizabeth Elliott

\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of English

UNION COLLEGE  
June, 2012

### Abstract

ELLIOTT, CATHERINE When Mountain meets Road: Mankind's connection to nature through sublime theory in Shelley's *Mont Blanc* and McCarthy's *The Road*.  
Department of English, June 2012.

ADVISORS: Professors Kara Doyle and Andrew Burkett  
Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2005) is a strong example of how post-modern dystopian fiction has captivated the mass imagination. Contemporary scholars have discussed *The Road* thoroughly, commenting on the text's redemptive journey, post-apocalyptic message or cauterized terrain. However, I argue that McCarthy's novel is not merely a modern text with an alienating landscape. Rather, the story conveys a strongly sublime aesthetic, which is recognizable from nineteenth-century British Romantic works such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mont Blanc* (1817). These texts have a shared obsession with the fictional representation and investigation of the sublime aesthetic and humankind's relationship with the natural world. Indeed, there is a fascinating correlation between the two texts, in terms of *how* the authors create a union between humankind and nature. *Mont Blanc* and *The Road* each have a functioning triad within, by which nature and humankind are balanced and reach equilibrium through the use of a third party.

McCarthy's and Shelley's respective works show strong connections and are clearly connected. However, I do not propose that McCarthy drew directly from Romantic texts. Instead, I argue that the relationship between *The Road* and *Mont Blanc* can best be explained through Michel Foucault's theory of the episteme, and I thus argue that they share similar themes and concerns because both authors tap into the same societal, aesthetic and historical *topos* when producing their respective literary texts. I contend that issues that spurred on the Romantic poets to write, have resurfaced again in the twenty-first century, and are contributing to modern literature in new and exciting ways.

*For my parents Keith and Elizabeth,  
And my sister, Sarah*

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	
<b>Chapter One: An Introduction to Sublimity, Power, Androgyny and the Episteme</b>	1
The Sublime	14
Androgyny	25
<b>Chapter 2 The Road</b>	32
The Triad	44
Nature Overwhelms The Man	44
The Man: Survival Structures	52
The Boy: Androgyny and Religion	55
Conclusion	71
<b>Chapter Three: Mont Blanc</b>	73
The Triad and an Introduction to Pantheism	75
First Party: Nature (The Overwhelming Force)	78
The Speaker: Resistance to Nature's Power	86
Pantheism and Androgyny	88
<b>Conclusion: <i>The Road and Mont Blanc</i></b>	97
<b>Works Cited</b>	101

## Chapter One: An Introduction to Sublimity, Power, Androgyny and the Episteme

In the past forty years, post-modern dystopian fiction has captivated the mass imagination. Books such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2005), which is now a feature film directed by John Hillcoat, have flooded the popular imagination with dystopic, futuristic landscapes. However, the commotion that these texts have inspired is somewhat perplexing, as the success of such fictions begs us to consider what it is, exactly, about these stories that attracts and sustains such avid readership.<sup>1</sup> As I suggest in this thesis, an answer to this question may lie in the past. A similar phenomenon involving the theme of alienation and utopic and dystopic landscapes arose roughly two-hundred years ago in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Poets and authors alike revolutionised the writing scene with a style known as Romanticism, creating a veritable riot among traditionalist readers. These authors broke away from traditional Enlightenment ideals of scientific analysis and dry rationalization within their writing and chose to focus instead on nature. In this project I argue that post-modern dystopias such as *The Road* and Romantic poems such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mont Blanc* (1817) share striking similarities, the most prominent of which is their shared obsession with the sublime and humankind's relationship with nature.

I argue that Shelley and McCarthy similarly wrestle with concepts of the sublime and with the ways in which individuals become overwhelmed in the face of a sublime natural landscape. Ecologically speaking, McCarthy has a slightly different viewpoint concerning nature, due to his greater scientific awareness of humankind's impact upon the environment, yet he and Shelley nevertheless share the major concern of how to connect with nature. Furthermore, the two authors create an almost identical structure for representing and managing the overwhelming sense initiated

---

<sup>1</sup> McCarthy's text sold wildly, quickly becoming a national bestseller. In 2007 *The Road* was featured on the Oprah Winfrey show and book club list, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.

by the experience of the sublime in literary form. I refer to this structure as a “triad” because three elements are involved are mutually dependent upon one another to reach equilibrium within a text. This device allows both authors to create a way for humankind to meet nature as an equal. The triad relies upon the Romantic concept that nature is characteristically feminine and the speaker is male. However, there is also a third party that mediates between the two. Using this symbolic representation, the male dislikes being overwhelmed by feminine nature, and thus he seeks a way to meet with her as an equal rather than remain overwhelmed and unable to connect with her. He invents a third party through which he can relieve the pressure. The issues of androgyny and religion come into play in the emergence of the triad, fuelled by the traditional gender roles overlay the whole symbolic progression of the triad. As a result, the perfect “union” or balance being found between man and woman involves androgyny (a being that encompasses both sexes in equal measure, be it mentally, physically, or both).

The similarities between *The Road* and *Mont Blanc* are so numerous that one might question how this has occurred. For example, one might ask whether McCarthy purposefully wrote his text as a modern Romantic piece. To answer this and related questions, I will turn to Michel Foucault’s theory of the “episteme” as expressed throughout his body of work (and especially in his seminal text, *The Order of Things* (1966)), to explain the resurfacing of the phenomenon of the Romantic sublime in the fiction of recent years. Mainly, the connections between McCarthy and Shelley lie in their similar desires to reconnect their readership to a sublime natural world and show how relevant the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime is to their respective contemporary society.

Shelley and McCarthy both share a deep concern for nature, yet, to understand their work one must look at the Romantic period. Poets such as Shelley embodied the distinct shift away from the Enlightenment deification of science and industrialization. Indeed, Shelley—along with William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—questioned how humankind,

which is so consumed by science by the end of the eighteenth century, could relate to the natural world. In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley raises the following major questions: is connecting to nature even possible for humankind? If so, what happens to a person who attempts to meet with the natural world as an equal? A similar phenomenon is seen in McCarthy's work, despite the fact that this novel is two hundred years removed from *Mont Blanc*. McCarthy highlights issues that are almost identical to those of Shelley as he asks what humankind is doing to nature currently, and whether it is possible to reconnect with nature as an equal.

Shelley and McCarthy not only ask similar questions, but they also use the similar structure of a triad within their respective texts to create an androgynous union between humankind and nature. The structure of the triad is visible in the struggle between humans and nature within each text. First, the authors employ the aesthetic of the sublime as well as distinct gender roles within their texts to illustrate the power struggle between humankind (figured as male) and nature (figured as female). The power imbalance between humans and nature is then mediated by a third party, which is of a religious nature in both texts, in order to find a balance, or an "androgynous union", between humans and the feminised nature. An androgynous union is one in which the author attempts to find a balance between the masculine protagonist or speaker, and the feminine element (nature), usually by uniting elements of the two into a third party. This third party then becomes an androgynous being in which both sexes are united, and which facilitates a balance. Religion and androgyny become tremendously important elements, as both authors utilise them to create and maintain the "androgynous union", and thus achieve an equal relationship with nature. These areas, in which the authors specifically connect or mirror one another, show that there is clearly a shared motivation behind the texts.

The structure of this thesis itself is purposefully set in order to dissuade readers from considering McCarthy's text as a literary allusion to *Mont Blanc*. Chapter 1 considers sublime and



androgynous theory, and is immediately followed by an analysis of McCarthy's *The Road*. This allows the theory of chapter one, to connect directly with the text. Had an analysis of *Mont Blanc* come first, there is the danger that the reader would subconsciously filter the reading of *The Road* through Shelley's poem, and fail to appreciate it as an independent text. The order of reading reflects our understanding of Foucault's episteme, as each text is singular and unique, yet connected through a *topoi* of cultural, social, political and environmental concerns. The structure of this thesis should aid the reader in understanding the concept of the episteme and allow them to regard McCarthy and Shelley's texts as separate but united works.

Nature is one of the key components that the authors have a shared interest in, yet it is important to note that their respective approaches are slightly different. The questions that they ask are distinctly similar in subject matter, but they have shifted somewhat in terms of *how* the questions are asked. McCarthy initially poses the same question as Shelley: can we connect to the natural world, and if so, how? Shelley was fascinated by cutting-edge Romantic science; yet McCarthy, writing as a contemporary author with a history of scientific disquiet and foreboding environmental science behind him, has slightly shifted his questions toward a forward looking warning, concerning the fragility of nature. McCarthy's image of the world brings to life the Native Canadian Cree saying: "Only when the last tree has died, and the last river has been poisoned, and the last fish has been caught, will we realize that we cannot eat money." (Elvey 2) As this passage suggests, in *The Road*, McCarthy brings this scenario into being: there are few living creatures, no crops or fields have survived; dead trees crash down, and almost everything is empty and lifeless. McCarthy shows that all societal constructs have consequently collapsed in the face of the ruin that nature has undergone. Unlike Shelley, he asks whether it is too late to connect with nature by setting his story in a sublime, natural landscape that is dead for all intents and (human) purposes. Instead, the setting summons questions regarding how we should be treating the landscape around us.

Shelley and McCarthy raise these ecological questions regarding how we should approach the landscapes of nature to determine how humankind can feasibly interact with them. Shelley is interested in becoming one with the landscape and rejecting the overtly reasoned ideals of the Enlightenment. In contrast, McCarthy is focused on how we interact and become one with a landscape that has become alienated from us, or that from which we alienate ourselves. McCarthy's approach involves modern ecological theory, in that he is attempting to discuss the struggle between the "anthropocentric" view of nature (in which humans are thought of as separate and should use nature to their advantage), in contrast to that of "biocentric" view of nature (the idea that the human is part of nature's community) (Light and Rolston 16). Shelley and McCarthy push back against ideas of anthropocentrism in their work, siding more with the biocentric view. As I explain further in chapter two, the way in which humankind treats the landscape is an issue that is dealt with extensively each text. Nature in *The Road* and *Mont Blanc* is depicted in a complex way, as both the landscape and as a figure with agency. This complexity is only added to by the aesthetic style in which the authors write: the style of the Romantic sublime. The texts clearly mirror one another in a number of ways: in their central concerns, in their use of androgyny and religion, in their structural choices in terms of grammar, and in the ecological focus found in both texts; yet, it is their use of the sublime which truly unites these factors.

McCarthy is not necessarily directly influenced by the Romantic era, nor is he harkening back to the time period simply to revive a dead form or make a type of literary fashion statement. Rather, through his writing, issues have arisen that are entirely produced by, and relevant to our society, yet which also feature in Romantic works. This concept is best understood through Foucault's concept of the "episteme" in his work *The Order of Things*. Foucault discusses a view of historical change through what he refers to as an "episteme"—that is, turning points in history in which various disciplines become similarly reorganized around sets of key ideas, questions, and

concerns. An episteme is a systematic change in history and signals the emergence of a new way to raise questions and provide answers to a variety of disciplinary concerns. The new ways of thinking, describing, and explaining can be referred to as different phenomena. These phenomena resurface intermittently throughout history as long as they are still within the moment of the episteme (Foucault xix). These resurfacing moments are described by Erkki Huhtamo as *topoi*, the product of epistemes. In his article “From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd”, he expands on Foucault’s theory, noting that *topoi* are things that are products of parallels, or

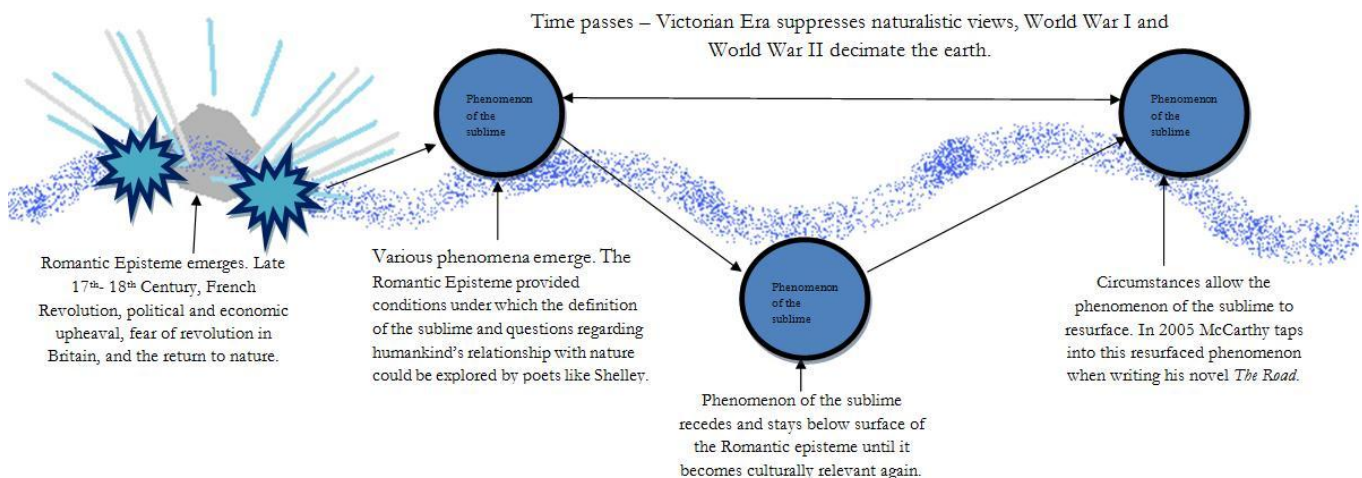
Links between occurrences, which are wide apart in time and space...these parallels are not totally random coincidences produced indigenously by conglomerations of specific circumstances. Instead, all these cases “contain” certain commonplace elements or cultural motives that have been in earlier cultural processes (Huhtamo 65)

Huhtamo explores the idea that “cultural processes” motivate the creation of *topoi*, which lead to connections being drawn through time as they are “indigenous”. This means that the *topoi* or elements which connect through time are both connections that transcend the immediate situation (as they are relevant in different eras), and culturally relative or organic of the time period in which they exist. Foucault’s main focus in *The Order of Things*, deals with *topoi*, and the development of science; however, his argument here is applicable to all manner of subjects and especially to the recurrent questions and structures that resurface in Shelley’s and McCarthy’s work.

Foucault’s work specifically sheds light upon the relationship between Shelley’s and McCarthy’s focus on the *topoi* of the sublime. He explains that history is more than a simple sequence of definable events to be rationalized in the logic of causality (i.e., through narratives of cause and effect). According to Foucault, one must allow for discursive elements, things that are never fully definable in a totalizing manner yet carve out new modes of thought. Foucault states, “I am not concerned...to describe the progress of knowledge towards an objectivity in which today’s science can finally be recognised.” (xxii) In this context, McCarthy, I suggest, does not simply look

back to a period in which the sublime is perfectly crystallized. Nor is McCarthy a direct descendent of a Shelleyan poetics of the sublime. Perhaps more important, it is not that he wishes to reshape the sublime to make it relevant today. Instead, I follow in the methodological footsteps of Foucault so as to “bring to light the...epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge...grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is...that of its conditions of possibility.” (xxii) In doing so, I explore certain characteristics of the episteme in which McCarthy and Shelley produce their greatest work. The episteme in which they work is made up of whatever “manifestations” of “history” have created the phenomenon of the sublime, and this phenomenon represents a shift in how the authors theorise about and understand nature.

It may be helpful to think of the episteme as a moment in which an idea is born and held (somewhat like a bubble) in history. This idea is what I refer to as the “phenomenon,” a concept that can alternatively be described as an historical *topoi*. The arrival of an episteme is something like the surface effects produced by throwing a stone into a river. The ripple that is created in time becomes the episteme, and the given phenomenon is important for a given period (i.e., the Romantic-age focus on the “sublime”), but gradually sinks below the surface of the stream of history



to lie dormant until it becomes socially, politically or culturally relevant and thereby “resurfaces” to become the *topoi* of concern of a subsequent generation. As long as the stream is still flowing and the repercussions of the given episteme (the ripples) are still being felt, the ideas remain below the

surface ready to bubble up again. It is this resurfacing of relevant issues, including the nature of the “sublime” that can be witnessed in McCarthy’s *The Road*, especially when juxtaposed against Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*.

I contend that this episteme begins with the historical moment of the French Revolution and the cultural shift toward nature that is encouraged in the Romantic movement. It encapsulates a phenomenon concerning the human connection with nature,—and specifically how humans might connect with natural forms,—as people attempt to address feelings of being overwhelmed. However, some of the characteristic and defining elements of the Romantic-era episteme went dormant after the Romantic period—only to re-emerge towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The phenomenon has been resting below the surface for some time, as the Victorian era moved swiftly away from naturalistic images, and the subsequent World Wars left the Earth (and especially the European landscape) so decimated that it was almost impossible to consider reconnecting with nature. Yet in the late 1900s, a period hailed for birthing utopias and dystopias in fiction, there is a distinct shift towards environmentalist thinking for the first time in a century, ushering in the re-emergence of the Romantic-era phenomenon.

Although the concerns of the Romantic period are not new in the 1790’s, something important shifts at the Romantic moment with the definition of the sublime aesthetic, and it is notable that two-hundred years later, we are still at that point of narrating, explaining and understanding the natural world, albeit with some shifts in the questions being asked. Now, anthropologists, environmentalists and natural scientists are actively engaging with humankind’s impact on nature and a result, contemporary thought once again has become saturated with naturalistic concerns. Thus, the phenomenon that was first formed in the Romantic era has resurfaced and is identifiable in *The Road*. The exact cause of the re-emergence of Romantic

elements is beyond the scope of this thesis, yet I shall attempt to demonstrate the effect. It is clear both Shelley and McCarthy re-activate the *topoi* of the sublime in their work.

It is important to note that in using Foucault's theory, I do not mean to imply that McCarthy is unaware of Romantic literature or that he is uninformed in regards to sublime theory. Rather, his possible knowledge of the Romantic sublime is beside the point, as his work demonstrates that there is more than a Romantic influence to his writing. The important thing is that sublime elements in McCarthy's text become part of the author's attempt to address and understand his main concern, humankind's relationship with nature. The similar manner in which Shelley and McCarthy come to terms with the struggle between the social world and the natural world shows that both authors are part of the same epistemic period of history that began with these crucial redefinitions of the sublime in the Romantic era.

Shelley and McCarthy explore this question of humankind's relationship with nature and the sublime power struggle that is present in the texts by utilizing androgynous and religious structures to combat feelings of powerlessness. However, in order to understand how Shelley and McCarthy utilize the sublime to ask their questions regarding the relationship of nature to humankind, one must first explore the sublime itself. Throughout this thesis I shall be using Sir Edmund Burke's interpretation of the sublime as the standard for discourse on the sublime in Shelley's and McCarthy's work. Burke is the key figure for the emergence of the sublime phenomenon in the Romantic-era episteme due to his extensive writing upon the subject in addition to the highly influential nature of his work. Furthermore, Burke's work informs Shelley's and McCarthy's respective texts, aiding us in highlighting the similarities between the two authors. Burke's writing regarding the sublime is most relevant to the conversation, so I will first look to his writing to explain what the sublime aesthetic is, and how it relates to the primary texts at hand.

## The Sublime

Scholars commonly claim that the concept of the sublime originated with Longinus (1<sup>st</sup> Century AD), a Greek philosopher who claimed that “[n]ature has planted in our souls a love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we are.” (Monk in Baillie, i). The concept of the sublime has altered over the last 1800 years. As Samuel Holt Monk points out in his book *The Sublime*:

no single definition of the term would serve in any single decade for all writers...; but the word naturally expressed high admiration, and usually implied a strong emotional effect, which, in the latter years of the century [17th], frequently turned on terror. (Monk 233)

As Monk suggests, the sublime is a highly charged emotional experience that is hard to describe. I will be using the definition of the sublime from Burke’s *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) in my analysis of Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*, and McCarthy’s *The Road* because Burke’s definition is the cultural product of the episteme in which both Shelley and McCarthy are writing. Three key factors characterize Burke’s theory of the sublime. First, he defines the sublime as “whatever is fitted to excite ideas of pain and danger.” (Burke 35) He argues that pain leaves a trace upon the mind and body that pleasure does not; thus, when the two are intertwined, pleasure is heightened, as it is more memorable. For Burke, the sublime is a physical experience, not merely a metaphysical consideration. Second, he separates the sublime aesthetic from religion and divinity, which is important because in previous discussions of the sublime, the boundaries between the two were hazy at best. Third, he breaks ground by explaining that nature’s overwhelming power is a “capital source of the sublime.” (60) This power is integral to understanding the balance between humankind and nature. The elements that Burke identified as sublime underwent a great deal of thought before reaching their crystallised state as we see it in Burke’s work. Three of the most influential thinkers before Burke are Gilbert Burnet, John Dennis, and Joseph Addison. Burke draws on the ideas of these authors and clarifies them, thus solidifying the concept of the sublime.

Scottish theologian and Bishop of Salisbury, Gilbert Burnet was the first to highlight some recognisable elements of the sublime. Indeed, he adopted a distinct approach to the sublime after crossing the Alps in the 1680's (Nicholson 18)<sup>2</sup>. Burnet never used the word 'sublime' but clearly grappled with the subject in its early stages of conception. In his book entitled *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681) he focused upon the contrast between nature as the Bible describes it, and nature as he saw it, as something having fallen from God's grace. Burnet had been struggling for some time to dignify his feelings regarding nature, as he felt "rapt" and "ravished, by the vast, the grand, the majestic." (Nicholson 215) He identified feelings of awe as those he associated with God, yet struggled to fathom these emotional responses to the landscape. Burnet believed God to have created a "circle of perfection" which constituted the natural world and its inhabitants (196). However, everywhere in the natural landscape that Burnet actually explored, he found "broken arcs" rather than "the circle of perfection." (197) In *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, Burnet argued that the moon and earth "are both in my judgment the image or picture of great ruin, and have the true aspect of a world lying in its rubbish." (197) It is these "broken arcs" and pictures of "great ruin" that constitute the early sublime landscape that Burnet was acknowledging with his work. The use of the words such as "great" and "broken" imply that Burnet is conscious of a discordant element in nature that is large and unsettling to him. Burnet's idea of the sublime was completely entwined and to a point, indistinguishable, from his theological concerns. Indeed, Burnet implicitly notes feelings of being overpowered and "ravished", (which would later be one of Burke's elements of the sublime), yet Burnet never fully gives name to this experience.

Burnet goes on to mention two more elements of the sublime—that of vastness and that of infinity. However, yet again he is unable to separate out the specific aesthetic experience from a religious context. Burnet does this by expanding upon his exploration of nature, and notes three

---

<sup>2</sup> See especially M. H. Nicholson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* for a useful discussion of Burnet's approach to the sublime.



foremost “irregularities” which disrupted images of perfection in nature (Nicholson 200). These irregularities are “channels of the sea”, “subterraneous caverns of earth” and “the mountains and rocks of alpine” which Burnet claimed simply could not be what God created (200). These irregularities can certainly be considered infinite in terms of Burke’s theory, as their images linger long after having seen them. Burnet claimed in his theological work that after the flood of Noah in the Bible, humans lives in the “ruins of a broken world”, scattered with “wild, vast and indigested Heaps of Stone and Earth.” (200) Again at this juncture we see the sublime element of vastness being weaved together with religious theorising. Burnet is heavily influenced by the Bible and is strongly interested in how Biblical stories interact with the natural landscape; however this interest impedes his ability to recognise the sublime aesthetic. Indeed, he goes as far as to infer that religion and feelings of awe towards God are inextricably a part of the sublime whole. Although Burnet misses a great deal in his work, there are certainly seeds of the sublime in his musings, as he acknowledges the senses of magnitude or vastness, infinity and powerlessness by highlighting their apparent discordance with nature. Burnet is significant in that from such humble beginnings, other authors such as Dennis, Addison and Burke were able to develop his ideas of sublime nature, eventually reaching a new aesthetic experience.

Other initial explanations of the sublime were much like Burnet’s in that they were strongly linked to religion and divinity. A follower of Burnet’s work and fellow theorist of the sublime was dramatist John Dennis, who developed a fascinating view of sublimity and beauty in nature and their relationship to religion. He, like Burnet, crossed the Alps before writing his letter *Miscellanies* in 1693. Significantly, in Dennis’s work we see one of the first mutations of the word “sublime” from previously meaning “lofty” or “high”, to referencing an aesthetic experience, and to capture those feelings that Burnet had discussed. He believed that “the true source of the Sublime is in God, and in great ideas which raise the soul of humans to thoughts of infinity.” (300) The feeling of awe that

is inspired by God was connected closely to the sense of awe inspired by the natural landscape. It is with Dennis' work, that the sublime is first linked to a sense of the infinite as he carefully attempted to define his feelings in a way that Burnet did not. Dennis ultimately believed that the sublime was religion, infinity and beauty all rolled into one. However, later theorists such as Burke and poets such as Shelley soon began to separate the elements of the sublime and extract religion and the divine. It was necessary to do so, since religion can be considered sublime, but is not an element which makes up the sublime aesthetic itself. This extraction was made possible by the decline of Christianity in popularity among Romantic poets, by the increasing popularity of pantheism (the belief that the divine can be located in all things in nature).

Dennis focused on the sublime as another form of beauty, not as an entity in and of itself. This is an issue that was hotly debated at the time, for Dennis argued that the sublime was “not a ‘higher beauty’; it was completely antithetic to Beauty and could only be expressed in ‘extravagancies’.” (288) This debate is addressed by politician, poet and playwright Joseph Addison (1690), who embarked upon the Grand Tour in 1699 and was the first to clearly separate the sublime and the beautiful in his periodical *The Spectator* “although he may not have realized the significance of what he had done.” (Monk in Nicolson 288)<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it was Addison's “analysis of the great” which led to “the important distinction between the sublime and the beautiful.” (313) Addison remarks in *Spectator 412* that vastness and infinity are things which “our imagination loves to be filled with.” (314), concluding that “wide and undetermined prospects are as pleasing...as the speculations of eternity or infinitude are to the understanding.” (314) In this passage, Addison is highlighting two elements that Burke later isolated and discussed more thoroughly: the element of vastness described in the terms “wide” and “infinitude”. Although Addison sometimes notes that sublime landscapes are harrowing, the most distinctive element of his work is the disclosure that in actuality, he finds

---

<sup>3</sup> Nicolson, author of *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* cites Monk a modern theorist.

these sublime landscapes “pleasing”. Addison’s separation of the sublime and beautiful, and his central focus upon the “pleasing” aspects of the sublime led to a new breed of interpretation. It was at this point that Burke picked up the scattered and varied threads of this ideology and firmly stated his sense of the Sublime verses the Beautiful. Burke’s thoughts on this are the most pertinent in examining the Romantic literature of Shelley, as the poet ascribes to a very similar set of ideals regarding the sublime. Yet, it is still important to understand the origins of the sublime fully and where Burke stands apart from his contemporaries in order to fully appreciate why his theory is being used.

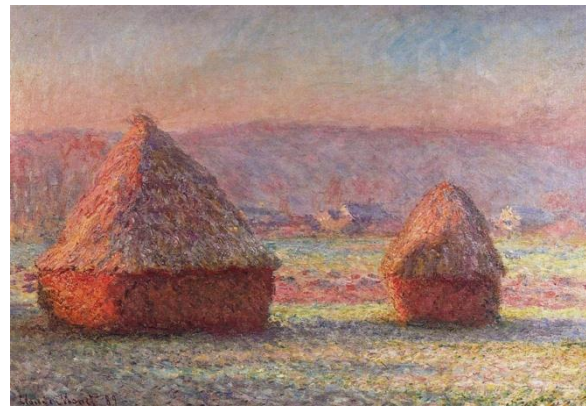
The theory of the sublime from the 1680’s is closely connected to the Romantic sublime of the mid 1700’s onwards. However, there are some important distinctions to make that separate Burnet’s and Dennis’s ideal from Burke’s Romantic approach to sublimity. Of key importance to the sublime described by Dennis, Addison and Burnet, is the idea that the sublime is something that one wishes to feel, an aesthetic that one actively looks for and attempts to achieve. However, these men were wrestling with an aesthetic that was struggling to come into being. Each of them had a hand in birthing the idea, creating and shaping a feeling that had never before been acknowledged or described. Later, Burke elucidates and solidifies this argument. He argues against Burnet and Addison to show that surrendering to the sublime is often done unwillingly, and that pain and pleasure create a dissonant longing to connect with nature in its sublimity. Burke’s argument is explicitly shown through his innovative explanation of terror’s integral place within the sublime aesthetic. Dennis had mentioned terror briefly, but it was Burke who grappled with the subject fully, with an entire section of his book entitled “pain and pleasure.” (314) His description vivifies the idea of the sublime, as it is no longer the placid “pleasing astonishment at such unbounded views,\” and “a delightful stillness and amazement” that Addison describes; rather, the sublime becomes a sedulously painful pleasure (Addison, as cited by Nicholson 313). Burke successfully defines the

sublime and isolates three key concepts from his forbearers; the significance of pain and terror physically; the separation of religion and divinity from the sublime and the importance of a power like one of nature's.

Burke distinctly tackles ideas of pain and pleasure, arguing that the sublime is an overwhelming experience in which the unity of the two feelings is integral to its memorable nature. He emphasises that pain and pleasure are “simple ideas, incapable of definition”, showing that it is hard to pinpoint exactly how and what people feel (Burke 30). Yet, he also points out that “people are not liable to be mistaken in their feelings, but they are very frequently wrong in the names they give them.” (30) Burke makes this point explicitly to address the fact that many people at this time were theorising about the motivation of pain and pleasure in a subtractive way (i.e., the removal of pleasure is pain, and the removal of pain is pleasure). However, in this statement, he is also implicitly addressing his predecessors, men such as Burnet and Addison, who spoke of beauty and the sublime without properly acknowledging the role of pain (or terror) in its own right. Burke goes on to express that pain and pleasure need not be contrasted and can exist independently of one another “pleasure has never its origin from the removal of pain or danger.” (32) This separation of pain and pleasure is much like that seen in Addison's work, yet has been consciously thought out and developed by Burke. Indeed, pain and danger to Burke are “the most powerful of all the passions.” (35) This is key to Burke's argument and theory concerning the sublime. To Burke, pleasure in and of itself is not nearly as memorable as pain can be. Pain or “Terror.” (as he begins to call it), “is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” (35) Burke argues that pain leaves a trace upon the mind and body in a physical way, that pleasure does not; thus when the two are intertwined, pleasure is heightened as it becomes more memorable due to its association with pain (35). It is evident that pain and terror are integral

elements to the sublime aesthetic that Burke is formulating as will be demonstrated in chapter's two and three in relation to *The Road* and *Mont Blanc*.

Like Burnet before him, Burke highlights vastness, or magnitude as indicative in inducing feelings of the sublime. Huge landscapes, cliffs or objects are often used by Romantic poets, as harbingers of nature's immensity, indicating the sublime aesthetic within their work. Burke specifically points out that "one hundred yards of even ground will never" have as much impact upon the viewer as "a tower [one] hundred yards high, or a rock or mountain of that altitude." (61) Thus, Burke is elucidating the "three foremost irregularities" that Burnet noted seventy-five years before, as each of his irregularities consisted of being exceptionally deep, extremely tall or vast. Burnet spoke of "broken arcs" in the "circle of perfection", and Burke is also tackling the subject of unusual and abrupt landscapes that have great apexes and unknown depths. He especially speaks of landscapes which interrupt the continuity of nature or the "circle" in abrupt and violent ways. A visual example of such contrast can be seen within two paintings of the 1800's, one Romantically inspired and German, the other Impressionist and French.



Caspar David Friedrich –  
Romantic (1818 *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*)

Claude Monet – Impressionist (1891 *Haystack*)

There is a stark contrast between these two scenes. Friedrich shows a vast landscape with obtuse and rocky crags punctuating a sea of mutable fog. The vastness of the sky and fog, and the rocky

outcrop in relation to the human form clearly contribute to its sublimity. In contrast, Monet's *Haystack* consists of man-made structures, and is softly painted, less visceral, and soothing. There are no violent figures protruding, and the subjects are geometrically shaded in a way that easily draws the eye to their forms, yet the painting avoids uniformity through careful use of perspective, a nebulous distance reaching past. Friedrich's painting is sublime and embodies the element of vastness, due to the special aspects of the painting. One can deduce from Burke's discussion concerning the element of vastness that it clearly contributes to the sense of being overwhelmed in a sublime fashion as will be demonstrated in chapter two.

The third significant element of the sublime is Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful* is the idea of infinity. He notes that "infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime." (62) Infinity and mutability were subjects that had undoubtedly touched the Romantic mind. Endless vistas interposed by ever changing clouds or fog (as witnessed in Friedrich's *Wanderer*) were commonly juxtaposed against a sense of endlessness. Many authors and poets noticed that clouds seemed transient, yet were infinite in that they were ever recycled in a cyclical fashion. Shelley frequently notes the mutability of humanity and ponders that one is powerless to know whether life is truly fleeting, or if, like clouds, we are ever present in different forms. To Shelley it is a difficult part of "life's unquiet dream", that he cannot determine how humanity connects with nature (*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* III 36). Clearly, the infinite is an element which allows Shelley to explore these questions within the sublime. Dennis introduced the idea of the infinite, yet Burke's discourse upon the matter is far more holistic and developed. Burke hits upon the element of the sublime that Dennis does; that there are "great ideas" which "raise the soul of humans to thoughts of infinity." (Nicolson 300) However, unlike Dennis, he separates the infinite from theological contexts (such as Christianity) Burke notices that "the senses, strongly affected in some one manner, cannot quickly change their

tenor, or adapt themselves” and due to this trait in humans (similar to the ringing in one’s ears after listening to loud music), the infinite enhances feelings of the sublime as the feelings simply “continue in their old channel until the strength of the first mover decays.” (Burke 62) The infinite enhances each of the other traits of the sublime by making them seem to occur for a longer duration of time. Thus, when a human witnesses vastness and experiences an overwhelming sense of painful pleasure, this sense does not leave the person instantly. Indeed, even after a the feeling “decays”, Burke’s argument states that due to the painful yet pleasurable feelings, one is likely to remember it for quite some time; the feeling of sublimity endures.

Possibly the most pertinent element of the sublime to this study is the element of power and agency coupled with its inverse: helplessness. It is imperative to clarify both the useful parts of Burke’s reasoning here, and his limitations, since the sense of helplessness is integral to understanding my theory of mediation between humankind and nature within McCarthy’s and Shelley’s texts. Burnet briefly addresses power, but it is Burke that has much to say on this subject, first noting that “pain is always inflicted by a power”, and it is an object or persons “ability to hurt” which lends it greatness (55-56). Burke fixates on metaphors concerning the animal kingdom to stress his point that the sublime “comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther...” (56) These are all powerful creatures that rule their respective habitats. Burke claims that it is the “ability to hurt” which connects power to terror, vastness, and the overwhelming aesthetic that he has crafted. For instance, if a human has tamed a lion, or mapped out a forest route, it is considerably less sublime and terrifying (just as it is less dangerous). However, when I later address Shelley’s and McCarthy’s work with this theory, it will be important to note that Burke’s interpretation has a minor flaw; it is clear in his examples that the closeness of a being to its natural state, and the relationship it has with humans is also an element which determines its sublimity. A tamed lion is diminished in its sublimity, or a mapped

forest less is fearful, due to their lessened “ability to hurt”; but *also* because humankind has asserted agency over them. That is, were these animals untamed, their sublimity would be largely increased.

Burke inadvertently notes this when he contrasts a lowly ass to a stallion, and a dog to a wolf. With these contrasts, Burke sees the “ability to hurt” increasing with the sense of the sublime. However, he fails to note the agency of humankind over the ass and the dog that is absent when considering an unbroken stallion and wild wolf, who are free to live in nature and are not dominated (thus they do not fear man) In other words, people seem to find animals, or landscapes, sublime and fearful if they do not hold dominion over them. I attest that in Shelley and McCarthy’s work, it is humankind’s *lack* of agency that defines power within the sublime, rather than nature’s dominion or “ability to hurt” of another. The difference is in the mind of the human being: it is not fear of being in pain, but fear of not being in control which is fundamentally part of the sublime. This shift in emphasis is important because Burke focuses on fear and terror, whereas in Shelley’s and McCarthy’s work, the emphasis lies in how agency imbalances can cause fearful reactions (such as being overwhelmed. Indeed, this lack of agency in Shelley’s and McCarthy’s work is possibly the most disturbing. Importantly, any combination of the sublime elements that can constitute the sublime (you do not need all four, for something to be sublime). In Shelley and McCarthy, the landscape is sublime and humans hold little dominion over it. The power struggles between the speaker in *Mont Blanc* and the humans in *The Road* are vital elements of the sublime and work with the triad as will be shown in chapters two and three.

Burke goes on to make an important distinction when talking about powerlessness. He notes that for some time other theorists had assiduously identified religion and God as an integral part of the sublime, much like Burnet and Dennis. They were correct in identifying religion and divinity as sublime, as oftentimes in early scripture “wherever God is represented as appearing or speaking, everything terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the Divine



presence.” (59) Nature in *The Bible* reflects God’s power, with both nature in its terror, and power contributing sublime elements to the text. However, Burke counters the approach that Burnet and Dennis take upon the subject. Rather than assuming that God himself is an integral element to the sublime aesthetic, Burke separates God from the sublime, and notes that the sublime is an entity in and of itself, just as God is. The two interact closely, but God is not numbered among Burke’s elements of the sublime as vastness, infinity, power and pain and pleasure (combined) are. Burke acknowledges that of God’s attributes, “to our imagination, his power is by far the most striking.” (58) The early confusion surrounding God’s involvement with the sublime is evidently due to the subject of agency. Indeed, Burke goes on to note that power is “undoubtedly a capital source of the sublime.” (60) Thus the connection that Burnet and Dennis made between religion and the sublime is understandable, but simplistic and unhelpful to later thought on the matter, since Romantic poets such as Shelley treated religion in any form (Pantheism included) as a third party in the text. It is important to make this distinction, because the tension between humans and nature is explored by using a third party (often religion or the divine) as a mediator between the two, as I shall show in chapter two.

Burke was not always correct in regarding to religion. For instance he argued the old maxim, “Primus in orbe deos fecit timor” or “it is fear that first made Gods in the world”, was false “with regards to the origin of religion.” (59) However, I believe that this statement (removed from theological debate concerning the origin of religion and the divine) is correct. In the works of Shelley and McCarthy, I argue that when humans feel helpless and fearful, the author creates a third party that fictionally holds all power in order to mediate between the protagonist and the powerlessness he/she feels. This is highly visible in *The Road* by McCarthy, and subtly present in *Mont Blanc* by Shelley as we shall see in chapter two. In understanding why the authors separated religion and the divine from the sublime, and why a third party becomes involved, we can consider religion and its

place in Romantic and dystopic texts. This idea will be integral in chapter two in understanding how power struggles are mediated by McCarthy in *The Road*.

Burke's elements of the sublime are a product of earlier theorists Burnet, Dennis and Addison as they attempted to identify the new aesthetic. Burnet's early confusion concerning "broken arcs" in God's plan was refined gradually into the separation of ideological and emotional/physical reactions that we see in Burke's work. As Monk so astutely noted, there is no single definition for the sublime that can fit all ages; however, Burke's emphasis on pain and pleasure, separation of religion and the divine from sublimity, and dialogue on power structures is especially well thought out and reflective of the stylistic movements seen in Romantic author Shelley's work and modern dystopic author McCarthy's work. Burke defined four comprehensible elements of the sublime (pain and pleasure, vastness, infinity, and power), and explained their place in the overall aesthetic. These are the elements upon which I will base my analysis of the sublime in Shelley's and McCarthy's work.

### Androgyny

The term androgyny is defined as a balance of masculine and feminine qualities in the human psyche or physicality. While the issue of androgyny might superficially appear to have little connection to Burke's work on the sublime, at a conceptual level androgyny reveals exactly how humans and nature can meet in a perfect union. To understand how androgyny relates to the sublime, one must recall the motivation of Shelley's and McCarthy's work: to attempt a deep-rooted connection between humankind and nature. I suggest that both authors require their readers to consider the ways in which humankind can connect with the natural world as androgynous matter/whole. Considering that nature, understood abstractly, has no inherent sex or physical sexual organs, let alone transparent or singular gender, how could such a union occur? The answer to this question

rests in the fact that nature, although not a sexual being, has a presence that can be overwhelming in its sublimity, and this sublimity sets the stage for a strong connection between people and nature. Following the ancient Greek maxims concerning nature, these authors choose to gender nature as female to make nature's presence less overpowering and more manageable. That is, when represented as "feminine", nature—according to Shelley and McCarty—can ostensibly be made less complicated and less powerful, and in doing so both authors may be aligned with a long tradition of misogynist representations of the natural world, from the Greek myths of Demeter, to works by Botticelli and Milton. The authors feel a need to neutralize the natural world by representing it as something they always already associate with diminished power—femininity. This is clearly a misrepresentation of both nature and femininity as it reduces them both to issues of minor importance. From this vantage point they impose a gender structure and use it to navigate and create a connection with nature. Within the confines of this constructed 'safety net', they can attempt a connection with nature without being overwhelmed, like someone putting their hand through a wire mesh or fence to touch a wild, untamed animal (such as Burke's sublime and untamed stallion or wolf). The authors are employing a third party (or structure) in order to waylay their feelings of powerlessness.

Diane Hoeveler and Warren Stevenson have both taken up the issue of androgyny to argue that Romantics were concerned with sexuality. Traditional power structures in Romantic texts are commonly reliant upon regarding nature as feminine or a female, yet these seem inadequate when analysing McCarthy's and Shelly's work. This is a concept inherited by the Romantics from ancient Greek and Roman literature, and thus cannot necessarily be signalled as symptomatic of any particular age. However, it should be noted that this inherited trait was used by almost all of the canonized Romantic poets, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge. The counterpoint to the characterization of nature as female is the ever-present (and almost always) male observer who is

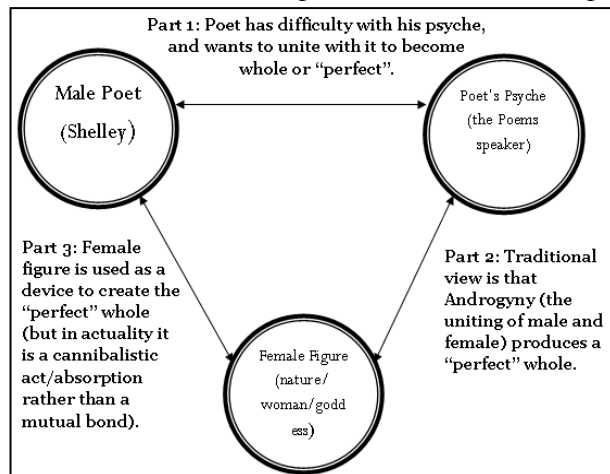
the active speaker within the text. These two elements are evident within both McCarthy's and Shelley's texts. Importantly, there is a struggle for dominance within *Mont Blanc* and *The Road* between nature, the female, and the protagonist, who happens to be male. However, even with such starkly gendered roles, it is apparent that when exploring agency in the sublime using a heavily gendered approach is inadequate. The androgynous ideal is a strong alternative perspective to use when applied to the specific question of how man can relate to nature and the effects that the attempt to relate has upon man. The traditional power struggles gain great significance when looked at through an androgynous lens.

Diane Long Hoeveler demonstrates in her book *Romantic Androgyny* that Romantic poets believed in a genuine struggle between male speakers and female figures within their texts. She argues that every female in the Romantic landscape, be it nature the mother, the sister or the cousin are all one and that their conglomerate whole is an irreverent depiction of all women. Her theories regarding Shelley are also applicable to McCarthy's work, in that they adequately describe his approach to the feminine figure and the struggle that he illustrates in *The Road*. McCarthy directly presents his rare female figure, the Woman, as a locus for scorn and resentment with which the man mentally wrestles throughout the novel. There is clearly a struggle between male speakers and female figures within the romantic and modern dystopic texts. Indeed, Hoeveler neglects to note that the struggle that Shelley and McCarthy deal with is more than a struggle between man and woman: it is a struggle between man and nature, which is represented constantly as female.

Hoeveler builds upon the basic sexual structure that overlays the struggle between man and nature, noting that writers like Shelley (and later McCarthy) both strive within their work toward an androgynous whole. She neglects to acknowledge that nature is a part of the scheme; however, for our purposes, nature and the female figure shall be consistently connected. Hoeveler noted that Romantic poets, including Shelley, believed in a "holy union", a meeting of a man and woman to

create one dual-sexed being that is androgynous and an “enlargement” of the poet’s own existence (Hoeveler 15). This is evident in Shelley’s work through the power struggle that is experienced by the poet, and the drive towards a mutual meeting place in which both poet and nature are interdependent of one another. In McCarthy’s work, he does not explicitly state, yet certainly harkens back to the search for an androgynous being, and interestingly employs a “holy union” within his own work quite literally in order to find a balance of both the man, and nature which is embodied by the boy. Hoeveler is correct in implying that there is a sexual structure which overlays the power play in romantic texts, and subsequently in McCarthy’s work. Furthermore, there is an attempt by both Shelley and McCarthy at reaching the androgynous whole that she speaks of in order to resolve in part, if not entirely, the power struggle that is occurring.

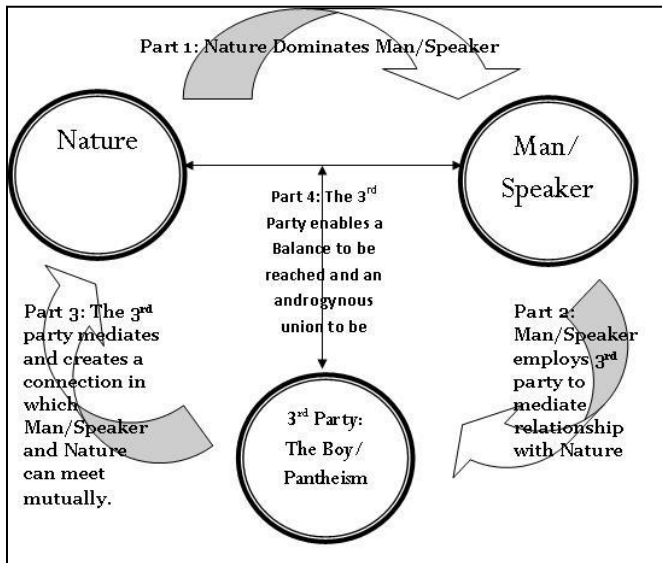
Hoeveler defines androgyny as the “fictionally perfect balance of masculine and feminine in the human psyche.” (Hoeveler 4) This statement is essentially correct; however, I contend that it is does not have to be a “perfect” balance in the psyche, but a balance, which has the freedom of



tipping slightly in either direction, whilst still maintaining equilibrium. I further argue that whilst some Romantics may have held this unrealistic vision of “perfect balance”, Shelley, the translator of Plato’s “symposium.” (a major text in androgyny theory) seems to be willing to

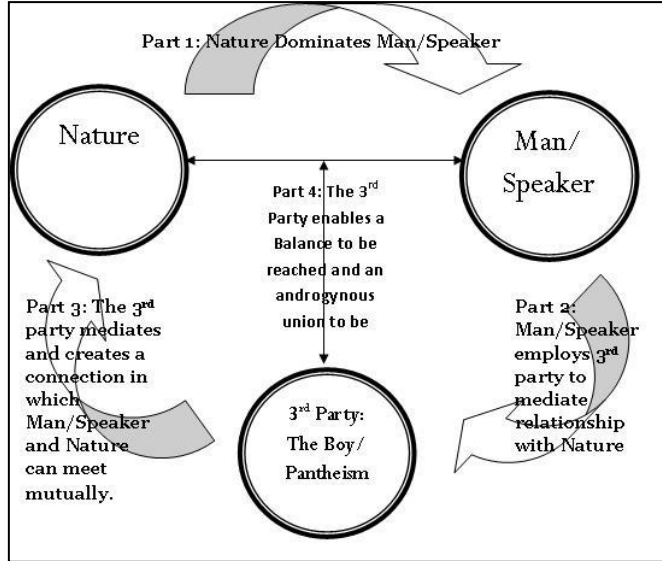
compromise, by reaching towards the ideal without any grand expectations of ultimate perfection, but rather a balance (10). Thus, with these points in mind, I define androgyny in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* and McCarthy’s *The Road* as an attempt to find equilibrium between the male psyche and the female psyche (nature) within the each text.

Hoeveler asserts that women of the Romantic period in literature are not actual women, but are symbols for the “essence of the feminine”, who are “cannibalistically absorbed” by the male poets in order to create a “divinely androgynous being.” (15) She believes that male poets wanted to unite androgynous “masculine and feminine qualities within the romantic male poetic psyche.” (Hoeveler xiv), in order to selfishly complete themselves, whilst subjecting women to a “suspension” of “existence.” (Blackstone in Hoeveler 12) Hoeveler argues that this is the motivation behind the masculine poet’s desire for an androgynous union, and that the male poets “self consciously...employed the feminine” in order to create a patchwork androgynous figure (9). However, this never came to fruition as they attempted to unite with an ideal, rather than with a real physical woman (9). She further mores that females “cannot be understood apart from this radical metaphoric tradition of literary absorption.” (9) Mary Jacobus, another critic and author, explains



the female presence in Romantic texts as: “a triangular mediator between aspects of the masculine mind.” (8) This image elucidates Hoeveler’s theory that the male Romantic poet’s motivation was to explore his own relationship with his psyche, which they did through the use of women (as illustrated in Diagram 1).

However, the idea that these poets are acting selfishly is far less evident in Shelley's *Mont*



*Blanc*. Hoeveler's argument is flawed in that she determines the motivation of the romantics to be a selfish endeavour, a quest to become perfect, rather than a desire to connect with the landscape in a balanced way. I argue that the Romantic's primary motivation was to seek a union with nature by attempting to unite with the feminine nature.

Yet, as Burke stipulates, the sublimity of nature is an overwhelming force for the poet. To reach a union with nature, rather than "cannibalistically" absorbing nature, Shelley subdues nature to a level at which he can mutually meet it. McCarthy also does this by linking nature to the female figure within his text. In order for the authors to mediate this balance, both authors introduce a third party into their work, creating a triad between which the power can be balanced.

The triangle theory is explained in Hoeveler's book *Romantic Androgyny*. She notes that current feminist theory claims that the three parties of "triangle (oedipal)" theory are the male poet, his psyche and the female object (3). The author of *Romanticism and Androgyny*, Warren Stevenson, claims that Shelley's focus is seeking bisexuality within himself, and the triangle is between the poet, his psyche and the "qua child", a child that supposedly embodies the poet's "childlike qualities...as a poet and man [Shelley] was essentially a child." (101) Stevenson's argument is ill-founded and assumptive in regards to the poet's biography; he does not explore his theory fully. I contend that the triangle theory is too sexually digressive and linked to the oedipal complex to be useful when discussing androgyny. Thus I propose a triad (due to its T shape) which occurs between the male speaker in the poem (who may also represent the poet), nature (the female) and a third party which

is usually without gender, or ambiguous in some manner. In *Mont Blanc*, this third party is the concept of Pantheism. In McCarthy's *The Road* the third party takes the shape of the character of the boy. This triad is a delicate balance which begins with the male speaker feeling overwhelmed in some way, and progresses to seek a physical and mental unity with nature, and a middle ground (the third party) that will essentially 'become' their androgynous union. This is illustrated in Diagram 2.

I have formulated the triad by re-configuring Hoeveler's argument, and highlighting the complexity of what the poets (and subsequently McCarthy) are attempting to do. Shelley and McCarthy are attempting to mediate the power struggle that occurs within each text between sublime nature, and the human figure. They do so by engendering nature as a female, and then employing a third party which absorbs attributes of both the masculine and feminine parties in order to create a balance through an androgynous form. The sublime and androgyny connect through this structure, as androgyny is a layer by which the poet can attempt to understand and draw close to nature. There are multiple layers of meaning being exchanged within this structure, thus it is vital to understand the origins of the theory which lie largely within Hoeveler's argument.

To conclude, androgyny is clearly an important element in understanding how McCarthy's and Shelley's text are united. Androgyny is a key part of the third party in each text that allows a balance or equilibrium to be reached. *The Road* and *Mont Blanc* shall be analysed in order to explore the standing question of how man can connect with nature. Analysing McCarthy and Shelley's texts by using the triad theory will help unveil the epistemic links between the two, and highlight their similarities in terms of literary method. Chapter two shall focus upon *The Road*, primarily because the text's similarities and epistemic value are best accentuated when positioned between chapter one's sublime androgynous theory, and chapter three's analysis of *Mont Blanc* as a traditionally Romantic text.



## Chapter Two: The Road

McCarthy's *The Road*, is a dark, dystopic text depicting a blasted apocalyptic landscape, devoid of life in any form. No tree that stands is living; there are no animals save a few fetid birds, indeed it much resembles Lord Byron's "Darkness" where the world is "void...seasonless, herbless, treeless...lifeless--/ a lump of death --a chaos of hard clay." (Byron 69-73) There is no explanation for the state in which the earth has been rendered; the reader is simply immersed into a bewildering yet terrible reality. McCarthy states, "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions...what is it? She said. He didn't answer." (McCarthy 52) The crippled landscape bears symptoms that are similar to a nuclear winter; "the ash[es] of the late world [are] carried on the bleak temporal winds to and fro in the void" in a perpetual drift (11). The only people that survive look like "something from a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted and sick," and each man stands as a competitor for the paltry provisions that are left (McCarthy 117). As Shelly L. Rambo notes, "for those unfamiliar with the book, there is no intricate plot...[it] is sparse as is the dialogue." (Rambo 99) A vital question regarding this text concerns whether the text is indeed sublime in the Romantic sense - especially when the landscape itself is dead. In *The Road* McCarthy asks certain questions that the romantics also deal with, such as how humankind can connect with nature. I argue in this chapter that McCarthy utilizes a triad structure to explore this relationship, just as the Romantic poets did. In order to see how *The Road* can be characterized as sublime, we must, of course, closely examine the novel itself and examine the sublime elements within. We can then explore the questions that McCarthy is asking and establish how they are similar to Shelley's questions about man's connection to nature.

Fully understanding a text such as McCarthy's involves tapping into a myriad of other authors' texts, and finding areas in which sublime theory is cited, even if such allusions are unbeknownst to the author. In order to witness how the sublime landscape of *The Road* is constructed, I shall explore the critical works of Hampsey and Rambo, who have constructed strong arguments regarding the text. However in each case these critics have overlooked the sublimity of the landscape when it could have reinforced their argument. Through analysis and critique of their work, I shall reveal the sublimity of McCarthy's landscape. Drawing on the insights of other modern scholars is useful when attempting to better understand the sublime elements of *The Road*, and help to decipher how McCarthy attempts to connect man with nature through the triad.

Contemporary scholars have discussed *The Road* intensively, commenting on its redemptive journey, post-apocalyptic message or "cauterized terrain." (McCarthy 12) Yet, despite a frequent focus upon landscape and scenery, scholars have yet to notice the inherent sublimity of the landscape in *The Road* and its epistemic relationship to the Romantic Movement of the 1800's. John C. Hampsey, essayist for the Gettysburg Review, writes specifically about landscape in his article entitled "Aestheticizing the Wasteland, Revisioning the Journey: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." Hampsey writes of the "lyrically beautiful" landscape that McCarthy reimagines "like a virtuoso etching his prophesy of the post-apocalyptic world...[writing] his way through it, over and over again." (Hampsey 495) Hampsey praises McCarthy's aesthetic achievements, exploring a number of moments in which it seems to mirror other classical texts such as Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, and Ovid's *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. He primarily compares it to Robert Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, which the critic argues mirrors *The Road* in that neither have a "traditional quest towards a worldly goal," and in that "both render meaningless the very notion of a purposeful journey." (497) He argues that *The Road* is a post-existential work, that triumphs in making such a literally meaningless journey for something that "does not seem to exist" yet still feels "heroic and

meaningful to the reader.” (498) This comparison is valuable as it allows us to place the text into the literary canon and note its theoretical leanings. Yet it is in aesthetics that Hampsey’s argument becomes especially relevant to sublime theory and highlights the traditional Romantic depiction of the sublime landscape.

Hampsey attempts to express how the story seems to be “unconscious,” rather than premeditated early in the article by comparing *The Road* to romantic poet William Blake. His comparative method is both helpful and perplexing at this point. He writes, “the story seems to unconsciously and spatially make its way across the blasted world where time itself nearly ceases to exist.” (495-6) Infinity is clearly evident as a sublime element within this passage when “time itself” seems to warp between the pages. Hampsey however, focuses on the prophetic nature of the text’s representation of landscape, rather than on what exactly creates this feeling of prophecy –which, as I suggest, is ultimately the sublime element of infinity at play within the novel. Hampsey himself highlights three of the four sublime elements within his first passage from *The Road*, in a fused together quotation containing examples of the landscape from McCarthy’s first chapter:

Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world...the land barren, silent, godless...the weeds...fell to dust...on the far side...the road passes through a stark black burn...the shape of a city stood in the greyness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see...days fording the cauterized terrain...tottering in the cold autistic dark with arms outheld for balance. (495)

The entire world becomes vague and distant from man, “dimming away” yet lingering in the mind ceaselessly as the “shape of a city” stands “like a charcoal drawing.” Further, McCarthy uses the word “shape,” inciting a dim sense that there is a protracted haunting of the senses, an infinite, enduring feeling of loss. Moreover, vastness is captured by the city as it stands looming and empty in the “greyness” which spans “across the waste.” Finally, the element of power is highlighted twice: first when the landscape is called “godless,” hinting that there is no ruler over it, and no sense of

order or meaning and second in the last sentence. Hampsey's quotation suggests that it is the "cauterized terrain" that is "tottering in the cold autistic dark." However, it is in fact the man, who has awoken to "A blackness to hurt your ears with listening," that demonstrates his lack of power as he "totters." Indeed, the term "autistic dark" implies that there is a mental or physical hampering of normal functioning for the man. He is undoubtedly at the mercy of the dark landscape about him, "arms outheld for balance" like a child learning to walk (14). The man is reduced to this movement, which visibly exhibits his overpowered state. This passage exhibits three of Burke's four sublime elements (save pain and pleasure), and these elements are manifest within the landscape itself.

The element of pain and pleasure *is* also present in *The Road*. One particular passage from *The Road* captures the sentiment of pain and pleasure succinctly:

The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common providence in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you. (McCarthy 54)

McCarthy here echoes Burke's work by claiming that "grace and beauty" are concentrated and completed through their relationship with pain. Furthermore, in this passage McCarthy signals that the boy, who was born in "grief and ashes," is the physical embodiment of both pain and pleasure (in the form of beauty). Due to this physicality, the element of pain and pleasure is literally unforgettable as the boy will forever haunt "the hour," and the "later" that has already arrived. McCarthy purposefully manipulates the reader's concept of time in order to create a circularity and to display pain and pleasure as pervasive and omnipresent within the text.

In Hampsey's article, Burke's element, the infinite, surfaces a second time in direct reference to William Blake. He mentions that "*The Road* feels like it was written by prophetic dictation; as William Blake would say of his visionary myth, "composed without premeditation." (495-6) Blake is a seminal figure of the Romantic era, thus such a connection between McCarthy's text and his own

should easily open the door to sublime theory. Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is also referenced; Hampsey's article mentions that the landscapes are incredibly dissimilar. He notes that Romantics saw landscapes as either "serene and joyful or" "cold and indifferent," *Mont Blanc* falling into the latter category, whereas *The Road* is a "sterile" nightmare of "collective consciousness." (496) Hampsey is correct in identifying that landscape in Shelley's text is different from McCarthy's; however, despite their clear differences (McCarthy's is dead, Shelley's living), both landscapes capture the sublime aesthetic, and reflect the authors' mutual interest in connecting with nature: it is their sublimity which unites them. Ironically, it seems that Hampsey speaks of the sublime in his essay, yet at each comparative crossroad; he chooses to look past the traditional idea of the sublime aesthetic, in order to claim *The Road* as a "clearly postexistential" text (497). Hampsey has contributed a great deal to understanding the aesthetic of *The Road*. His work is useful to compare and bring out sublime elements of the text and note the epistemic relationship to the Romantic Movement. However, he fails to note the sublime elements, which are taken up in this chapter.

Like Hampsey, Shelly L. Rambo, constructive theologian and Professor of Theology, inadvertently highlights many sublime moments in her discourse concerning redemption. In the article "Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* After the End of the World", Her argument centres on the idea that McCarthy's "post-world territory" cannot be adequately interpreted within the redemptive framework (the framework that is focused on Christian ideals of redemption), and that trauma theory unveils a new way to understand *The Road* (101). Drawing on the insights of novelist John Burnham Schwartz, Rambo notes: "[In *The Road*], the threat is not just dying; it's surviving" and claims that the question arises as to whether we can think "beyond redemption" in a post-world scenario (108). Her argument suggests that the man and the boy "journey in a traumatic landscape" rather than a sublime one (110). However, Rambo frequently

highlights sublime moments, which if acknowledged, could considerably enhance her argument regarding power structures within *The Road*.

Burke's elements of infinity and power are stressed early in Rambo's writing. She begins by noting that one can describe the landscape in McCarthy's novels as the "geography of terror...in which temporal markers of past, present, and future no longer hold." (101) She goes on to point out that "there is no distinction between night and day. All, it seems, is an eternal middle." (101) Rambo's discussion of time highlights the inherently infinite landscape in *The Road*, yet Rambo interprets it as a "crisis of meaning," rather than as an expression of sublimity (101). However, the question of how man can connect with nature might also be considered a crisis of meaning, and as such the sublime could easily reinforce Rambo's point by giving a clearer definition to what is meant by the term "crisis of meaning." Furthermore, religious language, like "Christ" and "oh god," is termed the language of redemption by Rambo. However, I argue that this language reveals the helplessness of the man in certain situations, as he attempts to supplant agency into a third figure (whether or not he truly believes in it) in order to feel less powerless in the face of the sublime.

Early in the book it is established that in moments of helplessness (be it fear, grief or joy), the man calls out to God. Furthermore, in almost every case, the landscape around him is the catalyst for this outcry. The first and most lengthy speech comes early in the text, as the man awakes and watches

the grey day break. Slow and half opaque...he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (McCarthy 11-12)

At this moment, he kneels "in the ashes" and asks "will I see you at the last?," this bodily posture and question instantly identify the being that he calls to as God. His questions (five within five lines of the book), magnify the man's helplessness and uncertainty, each question mark signalling that the

man lacks agency in the face of the “grey day.” The repetition of the phrase “Oh God” further emphasises the man’s fear, as “Oh” is an exclamation of surprise or shock (emotions that one usually reveals inadvertently through short onomatopoeic words such as “oh”). Furthermore, historically, people have called upon God when they wish to surrender their agency (or lack thereof) to someone that may be able to act. The man uses similar phrases later when he inadvertently stumbles into a basement containing partially butchered humans that have been hacked apart by cannibals: “one man lay with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt.” (110) The mutilated people “blin[k] in the pitiful light” and call out for help as the man exclaims: “Christ, he said. Oh Christ...Help us they called...Christ, he said. Run. Run.” (110-1) At this moment, the “pitiful light” and “blackened and burnt” people reflect the landscape that they now live in. This sight, coupled with the horrific action of cannibalism ushers forth the man’s helpless call to Christ, as he is powerless to help these people. It is by no means natural to eat human flesh, yet the cannibals have lost their humanity, they are wild and singular creatures that live only to seek out human flesh. The dangerous nature of the cannibals agrees with Burke’s definition of power within the sublime, and their lack of human sensibility makes them powerful and sublime according to my theory. Power highlights the connection between sublime nature and humankind by exposing the imbalance that is present between the speaker and the landscape.

Rambo’s text argues a similar point, claiming that the language of redemption is used “not in order to reveal its violence or to claim its fulfilment, but as a remnant of an irrecoverable world.” (101) The term “irrecoverable world,” shows that when the man uses this language, he is shying from the fact that time, agency, and life in general will never be in his control again. That he is utterly powerless, a sublime element revealed. However, what Rambo does not provide is a strong motivation for the use of redemptive language. Analysing the triad reveals that, redemptive language has two uses: first, to illustrate the man’s powerlessness, and second, to propagate the boy as a

religious figure (somewhat akin to God) acting as a vessel for the man's agency. That is, the boy takes on aspects of the man, whilst being associated with a higher agent; thus, since the boy is also close to nature, he is able to act as a mediator between the man and nature by aiding in balancing them, and when the man dies, by becoming a combination of man and nature embodied. In relation to the Romantic concern with nature, in Rambo's work it is clear that nature is an overwhelming force. With additional information sublime elements of *The Road* have been drawn out, and it is evident that the landscape within the text is inherently sublime.

Having looked at the works of modern authors, it is clear that the text *is* sublime. Knowing that *The Road* is indeed sublime, we can now attempt to determine how the Romantic Movement concerns and ideals fit with McCarthy's text. The first trope of the Romantic era, as mentioned in chapter one, was to engender nature as female. Until this point I have assumed that McCarthy also engenders nature as female in relation the man. Yet the question remains as to how – since the feminine representation of nature is not necessarily a traditional or expected representation now, as it had been for the Romantics. Here nature will be proven to be feminine in order to ensure that there is a strong Romantic basis to McCarthy's text upon which the triad will rely. It is important to be aware that the feminine nature I described is not that of the traditional feminine mystique, which embodies nurturing, and gentleness. Rather, the feminine sublime landscape is a mixture of nature's awful beauty and power.

In McCarthy's *The Road*, rare female figures are closely linked to nature and both have a very distinct manifestation. The main woman who features in the text is in many ways the embodiment of nature. She and the landscape are both consistently seen only through the eyes of the protagonist, that is, the man. The woman (wife to the man) passed away before the story begins; thus all scenes that contain her are purely from the man's memory. Furthermore, the woman, though held in the man's mind, undoubtedly embodies the landscape, as her identity align more and



more with the inhospitable post-world surrounding them; just as the landscape is dead, the woman is dead, as we see her only through the man's mind.

McCarthy frequently uses punctuation to highlight the feminine sublime and, immediately establish where the power lays, by having one party question, whilst the other is assertive and dominant. In the relationship between the man and the woman, the man begins assertively in the face of the apocalypse "She was standing in the doorway... clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? She said. What is happening?/ I don't know./ Why are you taking a bath?/ I'm not." (McCarthy 53) As the world dissolves into a "sheer of light" followed by a "series of low concussions" which signal the end of civilization, the woman stands vulnerable "clutching" the doorpost and "cradling" her unborn child (53). Constantly she questions him "what...?," "why...?" as the man replies with short succinct answers that foretell the serious nature of why he is filling the bathtub – because soon, there will be no water. In this scene the man is clearly the active agent. At this point the man is not yet overwhelmed by the natural sublime, he has control over many aspects of his life, and he does not call out to God or any other being for solace. Here the woman represents only an average pregnant woman concerned for herself and her child. However, this is the only time in the text that she is seen in this light. The role of traditional femininity is soon replaced by the sublime feminine image, of feminine nature to reflect the landscape of the post-world.

When the man returns to another recollection from his past, there is a clear shift in dynamics between himself and the woman; she clearly holds power and agency. With only a brief interlude between the earlier memory and this, that of a few pages, the difference comes as a stark juxtaposition. The man begins by attempting an assertive statement: "we're survivors he told her," the word "told" emphasising that there is little discussion to be had on the matter (55). Yet the woman questions him "survivors?...What in God's name are you talking about." (55) From the

punctuation alone, their relationship seems unchanged; however, the woman called upon God. In doing so, she infers that her husband's authority is not enough anymore and implicitly undermines him. She contemplates suicide with the man, and in doing so the woman emerges as a cold, aloof and very barren figure as the man cries: "I'm begging you", to which the woman replies: "I don't care. I don't care if you cry. It doesn't mean anything to me." Her response is clearly that of an emotionally removed individual. The man begs and pleads with her only to receive constant defiance and disregard for his emotions "please/Stop it./...I'll do anything." (55-6) Importantly, the woman is clearly the agent from this point forth. She has entirely seized agency of her situation, and is leaving the man and the boy to kill herself. This action gives her ultimate control over the man, as she tells him that he is powerless to stop her "I'm done. I thought about not even telling you....You can't protect us." (56) She states that she would take the boy with her if the man did not stand in the way: "you know I would. It's the right thing to do." (56) As she leaves, the woman states that she "will not...cannot" choose another path primarily because she wants agency, and if she stays she will lose all agency to the cannibalistic hoards that roam the land "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." (57) The lack of agency in "rape" terrifies the woman to the extent that she chooses to seize agency in the ultimate act – choosing to die. Some might consider suicide cowardice, yet in this setting, her decision to die undermines the man's choice to live, as he is choosing to ignore his inability to cope properly, whereas the woman is pragmatically accepting the facts.

Format in this section is particularly illuminating. The woman's dialogue dominates the page in huge sections whilst the man replies with short sentences of one to four words, admissions of helplessness and subjugation "I don't know.../Please don't do this." (56-7) The woman's power over the man is viciously asserted by McCarthy, much like the landscape's agency over the man is

aggressively portrayed “He fought back the rage. Useless...Even if it stopped snowing the road would be all but impassable. The snow whispered down in the stillness and the sparks rose and dimmed and died in the eternal blackness.” (96) Snowfall means death to the man and the boy at this point in the book, yet the snow still “whispered down” to die in the “eternal blackness.” Nature and the woman are aligned in that the man is powerless to stop either of them, he is utterly “Useless.”

Death is usually an event that occurs to people without their accord. It is incredibly unusual to have a choice in death, and rarer still to choose death over life. The woman’s power over the man increases due to her clear seizure of power and choice to take death as her “lover,” who can provide for her a thing that the man cannot: “eternal nothingness.” (57) Eternal highlights that the woman is taking on sublime elements as she unites with nature. She holds ultimate agency over her life when she chooses to end that life. In this action, her connection with nature grows stronger. She not only shares its power, but chooses to become one with nature through death. The woman dies alone with only the natural landscape around her. She leaves in the darkness; her “coldness” mirroring that of the night (58). Obsidian is the weapon of choice for her suicide “she would do it with a flake of obsidian...Sharper than steel. The edge an atom thick. And she was right.” (58) This naturally formed substance is a glassy volcanic rock with an incredibly dark black colouration, which perfectly reflects the darkness of the landscape and of death which awaits her. The ultimate power of suicide is highlighted again in the portrayal of obsidian when the edge is described as being “an atom thick.” This highlights the magnitude of the action that it takes to kill oneself. Much like the formation of the rock, the driving force behind this action must come from a second party, and must be enormous. Obsidian is only formed during volcanic eruptions, when the lava cools so swiftly that atoms are unable to organise into a crystalline structure (Miller 2). Violence and sureness of speed are required to create obsidian. This same quality is required in the agent and action of

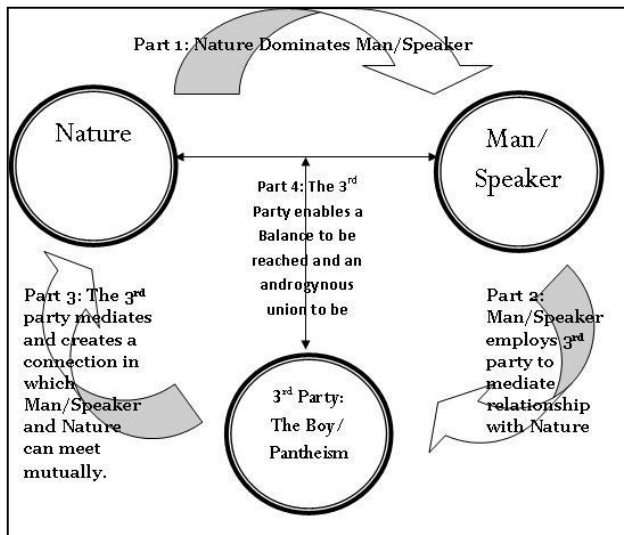
suicide. In creating this comparison, McCarthy hints that her suicide is like a natural phenomenon of great force. The woman's agency is undeniable at this juncture, and just as her power is undeniable, so is her connection with nature. In her moment of death, she and nature become one in defiance of the man; they are one in death, one in their power, one in the sublime and one in the man's mind.

If the reader had any doubts that the natural landscape and the woman are strongly aligned, and that nature is gendered feminine, McCarthy makes it clear when echoes of the woman's language taunt the man as he feels overwhelmed by the landscape later in the text. In their final discussion, the man tells his wife that she is "talking crazy," yet she retorts with "No, I'm speaking the truth...you have no argument because there is none." (56-7) Later, after a close shave with a cannibalistic migrating tribe in which the boy was nearly killed, they "stumbled through the woods...hand held out before him. He could see no worse with his eyes shut." (67-8) The man momentarily lost agency, and as he stumbles about, the phrase "see no worse with his eyes shut" implies not only that it is dark, but that the man is wilfully blind to his lack of agency, only acknowledging it in relation to its suppression. This suppression soon comes when he notes in the "grudging light that passes for day" that there is "a single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not." (68) The man knows that with one bullet, should something go horribly wrong, he will only be able to kill either himself or the boy. Effectively he "can't protect" the boy or himself properly (57). One of them will have to suffer; one of them will have to be alive when the cannibals take them. This knowledge is terrifying, and echoes the woman's earlier words that "[the man] won't face it." (57) Furthermore, his assurance to himself that he "will not face the truth" sounds disconcertingly familiar to the woman's point "you can't protect us...I'm speaking the truth," he is in self-denial, yet knows that he has "no argument because there is none." (56-7) It is evident that the man is acutely aware of his lack of agency, yet he consciously denies it in order to

carry on. The woman's voice is so interwoven with memories of being overwhelmed and with the landscape itself that she can be considered a physical embodiment of the effect that the sublime landscape has upon the man. Thus, nature can be characterised as female. Evidently, the romantic ideal that the landscape is feminine, is present in McCarthy's work.

### The Triad

*The Road* is now established as a sublime text with nature characterised as female, yet one must ask



how the triad, and androgyny, which were discussed in chapter one, function in relation to the sublime female landscape. In the triad, there are three parties interacting: first, the feminine nature that serves to overwhelm man. Second, the man, who responds to his feelings of being overwhelmed by attempting to maintain a sense of agency through a third party: and third, the

boy, who embodies religious elements as well as naturalistic, and androgynous ones. The boy is a carefully crafted post-apocalyptic figure of the end-world that incorporates man *and* nature, and who gradually assumes agency throughout the novel. This is the triad in action within *The Road*. We will see a strikingly similar interaction in *Mont Blanc*. It is this particular way of depicting the sublime, and power struggles within it, that can clearly be traced to the same epistemic moment, thus proving that McCarthy's text unwittingly taps into the phenomenon which embodies the romantic sublime, and proves it relevant to today's concerns within society.

### Nature Overwhelms The Man

Having established that nature is represented as feminine in McCarthy's text, one must next determine how it is represented as overwhelming in relation to the man. This is important to recognize, as the sense of being overwhelmed by nature and sublime aesthetic serve as the driving force behind the struggle that shapes the triad. We have already seen that the man deals with being overwhelmed through frequent outbursts in which he calls to God; however, there are other indicators that help depict the struggle between man and nature. In Burke's analysis of the sublime, it is physical agency and the physical feeling of pain and pleasure that take precedence, thus the lack of physical agency depicted in *The Road* is a strong indicator that the man is feeling overwhelmed. It is also important to note that nature's overwhelming effects are best seen through the man's eyes and through his reactions. Many of the examples ahead demonstrate nature's agency and overwhelming power through the man's response to his own lack of agency.

The first and most noticeable evidence of the man's lack of physical agency is that his power to name things has left him. In the Bible, Adam is called by God to name all of the animals under the heavens "so Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field." (Gen 2:20 NKJB) This is essentially the first human act of agency in all of history, and Adam is elevated above the base creatures of the earth through the action of naming. McCarthy cleverly deconstructs this essential sense of control and power. Mid-way through the novel, the man and the boy remain nameless themselves, having nothing to identify them but their words and their actions. The man feels that they are close to death because they ate their last "handful of dried raisins" two days ago (McCarthy 87). The man "tried to think of something to say" but could not,

He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colours. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true.

More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already?  
The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down  
like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever (88-9)

The word “parsible,” though not listed in a dictionary, seems to mean “that which can be parsed”; parsing is the act of “analysing a sentence and breaking it down into its component parts in order to describe their syntactic roles.” (OED online) Thus using this definition, McCarthy is highlighting the “entities” that could be analysed into separate parts both linguistically and in terms of ideas.

McCarthy is highlighting the structures of our minds, those which we have learned and internalised so deeply that they are integral to our way of thinking. The slow deconstruction of these things, as the fade into “oblivion,” is a truly terrifying concept. McCarthy attempts to explain how important things to us such as “colours. The names of birds. [And t]hings to eat” slip past so easily to be lost to nothingness. What is more frightening in this passage is the loss of “the names of things one believed to be true,” religious beliefs, the belief in yourself, in good and evil, in beauty, in family and friendship. All these basic structures upon which human beings build their lives are revealed to be “more fragile than he would have thought”; they are delicate constructions that cannot bear the weight of the sublime post-world. The man questions himself, asking “how much was gone already”; his helplessness is acutely manifested at this moment. Essentially, the man has lost all power over nature because he cannot name things, and if one cannot claim agency over nature as Adam did, then nature becomes overwhelming.

Within the passage, McCarthy makes an important statement regarding the nature of language, implying that the structures are dependent upon mankind’s consistent reiteration of them, yet also suggesting that man is dependent upon them, because without words, the man loses some essential structures that make him feel human. His beliefs, dreams, likes, and dislikes all depend upon words and names. Without names, the landscape becomes the “unmapped forest” that Burke described, for man no longer holds agency over that which he cannot name. As the man loses his

ability to name things, he also is sapped of agency over the sublime landscape which gradually becomes more and more overwhelming. McCarthy illustrates the degeneration of the man's agency linguistically, but also physically.

Physical disintegration occurs slowly in *The Road*; the man seems relatively healthy for a survivor of the post-world landscape. However, his condition gradually begins to deteriorate, paralleling the erosion of his agency. The man begins to show signs of weakness at key moments, the first in a mountain pass when it seems likely they will die "slogging to the edge of the road...he stood bent with his hands on his knees coughing...On the grey snow a fine mist of blood." (30) After this initial sign of sickness, the man shows few others until later, when they have run out of food. He "stood leaning on a post coughing" and finds it incredibly difficult to concentrate "he thought that he was getting stupid and that his head wasn't working right." (98) His condition gradually worsens as they travel south toward the sea, until they finally reach the coastline where "he walked up the beach, his long shadow reaching over the sands before him, swaying about with the wind in the fire. Coughing. Coughing. He bent over holding his knees. Taste of blood." (237) The man is bodily deteriorating rapidly near the end, his "shadow" that is "swaying about" metaphorically unveiling the serious situation of his illness. Throughout the book the boy consistently asks "are we going to die" or a similar version of this question (87, 94, 100). To which the man replies yes, but not now, not yet. However, when he asks himself this question he realises that "every day is a lie...but you are dying. That is not a lie." (238) The knowledge that he is getting closer to death runs parallel to the man's swiftly diminishing ability to maintain agency. One of the key reasons the man degenerates so swiftly is that the landscape cannot provide sustenance, and the man is relentlessly at the mercy of nature's snow storms, winds and rains.

The lack of physical agency is assimilated into interactions that occur with other people on the road, as well as being illustrated by the man's bodily degeneration. One such incident comes



early in the novel when the man and the boy are walking along the road. They have some food, two bullets in their gun and warm blankets. It has yet to snow, and they have not yet become ill or encountered any of the cannibalistic tribes that roam the road. As the man and the boy walk along, they come across a charred looking figure,

he was as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut, and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull. As they passed he looked down. As if he'd done something wrong. He's been struck by lightning.

Can't we help him? Papa?

No. We can't help him...there's nothing to be done for him...we have nothing to give him. We have no way to help him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we can't fix it (50)

The figure that they meet is described as a part of the sublime landscape “as burntlooking as the country.” Aside from the figure being badly burnt, his connection with the landscape hints that the man will have little to no agency over the figure. This is confirmed by the figure’s shying from their glances, choosing to “look down” instead. In many ways, the figure is just as overwhelmed as the man and the boy, if not more so. He was entirely overtaken by nature in a literal sense when he was “struck by lightning”, and this is physically reflected by one of his eyes being “burnt shut,” and his hair being “a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull.” Physically he is entirely consumed by nature, his hair becoming the “ash” that falls in drifts across the post-world landscape, overshadowing the cities of men and their creators indiscriminately. The boy asks his father if they can help the figure. At this point it would seem that the man holds agency, as he tells the boy no that there is “nothing to be done,” and that they “can’t fix it.” He seems to speak comprehensively, about the figure and the world around them all at once. However, with this admission, direct and powerful as it may seem, the man shows that he is agent only over the boy and the current decision to not help the figure. In reality the man is commenting on nature at large (as it is embodied by the

figure) and impressing upon the boy, the truth that they have little control over the sublime landscape which surrounds them.

In *The Road*, lacking agency is not merely displayed through situations in featuring danger, disfigured humans or bodily degeneration. McCarthy also displays the man's lack of power even in rare moments of good fortune or joy. Mid-way on their journey south toward the coast, the man and the boy are on the verge of starvation when they find an underground bunker. The man's first words, "Oh my God, he whispered. Oh my God", remind the reader eerily of the moment earlier in the text when he broke into a cellar only to find it full of mutilated half-eaten, half-alive human bodies "help us, they whispered. Please help us./ Christ he said. Oh Christ." (138, 110) However, this time it is the man who "whispers" upon opening the hatch, his call to God not signalling his horror and overwhelming disgust, but his relief and joy at seeing a bunker containing "crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jugs." (138) The man's lack of agency is physically reflected as he "held his forehead in his hand...Chile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. The richness of a vanished world." (138-9) The man's physical reaction to everyday items such as "corn" and "soup" is overpowering. Here it is not the sublime that is overwhelming the man directly, but the memory of a world in which the sublime landscape was secondary to mankind's agency, the "vanished world" slams into him, mentally stunning the man for a time before the reality of the sublime landscape rushes back in. The man realises that "anyone could see the hatch lying in the yard...he had to think about what to do" before they are found by the cannibalistic hoards scouting for food (144). The man has to be on guard and consider the reality of the sublime landscape. McCarthy vividly illustrates the linguistic, physical and mental degeneration of the man's agency throughout *The Road* expressly in relation to nature and the sublime landscape. Nature stands throughout as an overwhelming figure that is simply too much for the man's mind to deal with.

## The Man: Survival Structures

McCarthy depicts the man as a figure that is overcome within the text by the sublime aesthetic and natural landscape. Within the triad, nature is certainly a key party and contributor to the triad's initial imbalance. However, the second party involved in the triad (the man) constantly counteracts his mounting sense of helplessness and attempts to connect with nature, thus creating tension between himself and the landscape. The man maintains his sense of agency by setting missions and giving their journey an aim (even if the intention behind their mission has become redundant). It is essential to understand that the man's myriad of coping strategies that are displayed in this section are insufficient to restore balance between himself and nature; the only thing that does work to restore balance is the boy. Yet, despite this the man attempts to strengthen this agency by actively choosing to believe in God and most importantly, by believing in his son. The connection between God and the boy becomes vitally important later as the man chooses to preserve his false sense of power by gradually transferring agency to the boy. Through these actions, the man is visibly struggling against the overwhelming sublime force of nature within the text, and attempting to connect with the landscape.

Purpose is vital to the survival of the man and the boy in such a barren and sublime landscape where they are "each other's world entire." (6) Each of them needs a reason to keep going, and as the woman points out "you won't survive for yourself." (57) The man chooses his mission to be to move "south. There'd be no surviving another winter here" with the knowledge that "the boy was all that stood between him and death." (4, 29) Yet his aim is always, always to head south, even with the knowledge that the mission itself lacks meaning, "he said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and [had] no substance to it." (29) The man acknowledges the futility of his mission, yet maintains that it is

important to head south; indeed his insistence becomes very vehement in moments when he seems to lack control. One such instance is when the man and the boy have eaten the last of their food, the boy asks “are we going to die now?” the man replies “no. We’re going to drink some water. Then we’re going to keep going down the road.” (88) His assertiveness is evident in his short sentences that broke no argument, coupled with the questioning and weaker responses from the boy who simply replies “Okay.” (88) The mission to head south is what drives the man onwards and maintains his small sense of control.

The man’s aim is clear, yet the emptiness of his aim seems to plague him, so he creates a second layer to their journey. He tells the boy, “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you...we’re still the good guys.” (77) Here the man assigns himself as one appointed by God himself to protect the child. In addition to this, in the apocalyptic post-world where morals and structures and the “parsible” things that one “believed to be true” have dissolved, the man teaches the boy bygone concepts of binaries like good and bad (88-9). The man clings to a vanished concept; he believes they are unequivocally the “good guys,” like cowboys in an old west film. The “good guys” concept is one that is maintained throughout the novel and built upon by McCarthy. This belief sustains the tension between man and nature, because despite his inability to uphold any sense of normalcy in this landscape, he is able to retain the very basis of the moral structure that mankind developed.

The man’s belief in God permeates the text significantly, and clearly serves to help him in his struggle for agency with nature. God can be noted in sublime descriptions of the landscape and scenery around them: “the city...like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk...the mummied dead everywhere...latterday bogfolk...they were discalced...like pilgrims.” (24) Here the scene is evidently sublime as vastness is explicitly mentioned, and religious tradition is interspersed, showing the remains of order. Terms such as “latterday,” “discalced” and “pilgrims” all explicitly

signal a religious vein. However, God is especially evident in regards to the aims that the man chooses. The man says that he is appointed “by God” to protect the child and the boy claims that they are not only “good guys,” but that they are “carrying the fire.” (83) There is a strong religious undertone in the term “carrying the fire” as at multiple points in the Bible, fire is used as an expression of Godliness. In the Old Testament book of Exodus 3.2, God appeared as a flaming bush to give Moses his mission “the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire...he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” (NJKB) In the New Testament, John the Baptist claims that Jesus “shall baptize [people] with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” (Matthew 3:11 NKJB) “Carrying the fire” can be construed as a religious phrase denoting the carrying of the Christian Holy Spirit. Thus, for the man and the boy, this mission is a mission for God as much as it is for themselves. Whether or not God exists in the barren landscape, the man clings to religion as a higher form of agency.

When discussing the man’s struggle to maintain agency in the face of the sublime, one of the reasons that he maintains religious ideas becomes swiftly evident. Just as the man creates an aim or mission to give himself purpose, so he creates a third party guiding agent so that he can believe in something more than just himself and the boy. The strong third party has multiple roles to play, partially as a comfort to the man “are you there?”; partially as someone to blame “curse God and die” and partially as a more powerful figure that can be called upon for help in dire situations “he knelt there wheezing softly. Am I to die...tell me how I am to do that.” (11, 114, 175) The man also uses his belief in God to maintain a sense of order in his life, and construct a safety net through which he can communicate and connect with nature without feeling helpless “like some ancient anointing...evoke all forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.” (74) Here the man literally analyses his actions, admitting that when he has nothing left to believe in he creates things to believe in, and when he lacks order, he will “construct”

it “out of the air.” The term “breathe upon them” references God’s actions in Genesis 2:7, when “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (NKJB) Thus, the man implicitly states that he, like God is a creator of structure and life, because without his constructs he would become overwhelmed by the sublime landscape.

God and religion are ingrained within the man, so much so that he employs religious discourse in almost every situation to help bolster his sense of power. Significantly, religious discourse is used when the man is remembering and accessing his memory. As he wakes in the post-world, it was “as if the lost sun were returning at last...A forest fire was making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them.” (31) The man cannot move, as he is captivated by the tremor of a memory: “he stood there a long time. The colour of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.” (31) Order is important to the man, as “make a list” suggests. However, when one recites a holy litany, in which one chants repetitively with a series of replies made by a congregation. It becomes deeply ingrained into the mind if one attends church regularly. A litany helps the man remember, as though he has repeated his memories over and over again to keep them alive. It is certain that the man does this to an extent as he relives his perfect day early in the book “there was a lake a mile from his uncle’s farm...his straw hat. His cob pipe in his teeth...A radio somewhere. Neither of them had spoken a word. This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon.” (12-13) The repetitious and ordered way in which the man hopes to remember is false, as memories are insubstantial and often fade. Yet, by connecting his remembrance to religious ceremonies, his repetition becomes a kind of ritual that he can control. The man attempts to struggle against the sublime landscape by using it to access his memories, which ferment his sense of agency and will eventually allow him to connect with nature again on a mutual standing.

There are signs that signal the man's wish to connect again with nature in an abstract way. Initially he dreams of his life as it was in nature: "the shore was lined with birch trees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond." (13) The landscape is still sublime, in that neither had "spoken a word," yet the day filled with "bone pale" trees and "dark," unknowable evergreens lingers in the mind infinitely as "the perfect day." (13) This imagery comes to mind when the man argues with the woman, claiming "We're survivors," like the trees that stand "bone pale," yet strong in a changed environment (55). Her angry retort shows that she has nothing to hold on to "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film." (55) Evidently the woman has completely disconnected, not only from her human relationships, but also from her hopes in nature. She maintains a relationship with nature, but in the sense that she wants to become as dead as the landscape, not to find a new way to navigate the alien terrain. The man still has this hope; he struggles on, attempting to connect. Clearly, the man's coping structures are partially working, but are unable to fully heal the discord felt between himself and nature.

One instance in which we see the man directly relate to nature is when "he stopped. Something in the mulch and ash. He stooped and cleared it away. A whole colony of them, shrunken, dried and wrinkled... He bit a piece from the edge...Morels. It's Morels...they're a kind of mushroom." (40) In finding the Morels, the man encounters something natural yet familiar and does not hesitate to pause and "stoop" down to "clear [the ash] away." The "shrunken, dried and wrinkled" little mushrooms almost seem like an emaciated old creature, but the man does not hesitate to taste them. Rather he seems eager, the man's connection to his pre-apocalyptic knowledge is not only welcoming to him, but he seems to have a new appreciation of nature as he tastes Morels. It is evident from brief but frequent moments of similar natural connection that the man is actively looking to parlay with the natural landscape. McCarthy employs religious ritual, the landscape and literary device to illustrate the man's power struggle with nature. The man's coping

structures are varied and consist of many different mental strategies, yet they still are not enough to heal the rift and create balance between man and nature. McCarthy thus employs the boy, and spends equal time and measure upon the power play that is occurring between the boy and nature. This is significant as the boy is the only party that can bring man and nature together and renew the man's connection with nature.

### **The Boy: Androgyny and Religion**

McCarthy carefully crafted the boy to be a product of nature and of man. By the end of the text, he stands as an agent for both parties, and there is a clear balance between the two. It is significant that in claiming there is a balance it should not imply that there is "reconciliation" between man and nature, or that things are returning to the way they were before the apocalyptic post-world. Indeed, such reconciliation would not signal balance or equilibrium of any kind, as the world before the apocalypse was one of waste, and in which nature was physically ravished for her resources. What is meant by balance is that man and nature are comfortable with one another, and able to coexist to a point. McCarthy by no means illustrates the perfect union between man and nature, but he *does* represent the struggle towards such a union. The road to the perfect union is created through characterization of the boy. Under strict guidance, he grows to be more like the man, and is depicted as religious or godlike in many passages. In this way he is united with a sense of power. The boy is also gradually nurtured and entrusted with more power as he rejects the well fostered but childish "fantasies" that he might one day meet "other children." (54) The boy embodies the natural sublime through his alien appearance, the rejection of childhood, and the active adoption of power which is illustrated in his relationship with the man, but also in his relationship with the landscape. McCarthy hints at this relationship by fusing nature and the woman together to create the feminine sublime landscape. This action carries a double meaning, as the boy is genetically a blend of the



parents, part the woman (and thus nature), and part the man in a literal sense as well as a metaphysical one. He literally and mentally is the agent of both man and nature, thus it is particularly apposite that he mediates a balance between the two.

Earlier we saw that the man, (the second party in the triad), used religion as a directing beacon for their journey and to provide himself with a basic sense of power with which he could stand as equal to nature. However, religion plays a large role in terms of characterizing the boy too. Many times throughout the text, the man seems to be idolising the child, turning him into a religious figure. McCarthy's purpose is evident; he gradually builds the boy up to become an agent of both man and nature, and as such, the boy has to be imbued with humanity and the "old way" of doing things (as well as more natural concepts) such as religion.

McCarthy unites the boy with religion first, to connect him to a greater power; he thus seems less fragile and small. This is demonstrated when the boy is stoking the fire one night, and his father "watched him stoke the flames. God's own fire-drake. The sparks rushed upward and died in the starless dark." (31) Here the boy is performing a mundane task, yet it takes on a kind of ceremony as the boy is named God's "fire-drake," meaning a fiery dragon. Strength is highlighted in the boy; though fragile as the sparks that "rush upward" to die in the "starless dark," it is present and must be nurtured, just as the fire must be stoked. The child briefly takes on the phantasm of a dragon, imbued with his power by God. The man's constructions of agency that he passes on to his son thus have a truth to them, they become more real the more they are believed.

McCarthy consistently shows the progression of the man and the boy's relationship especially in terms of agency and religion. The man connects the boy to God-like figures, as a juxtaposition to McCarthy's depiction of the child as a mud-streaked and delicate. Early on in the text, the man makes assertive but starkly different observations about the boy. At first he is a small and fearful person that the man uses to help maintain his sense of agency "he woke whimpering in

the night and the man held him.” (36) Clearly the child is afraid and seeks the man’s agency as refuge. Yet, moments before he is described by the man who claims: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke.” (5) The boy is immediately elevated to the level of a man that God spoke into being. The only man who is noted to have ever been spoken into being directly by the Christian God is Adam, the first man. This connection implies that the boy is the first of a new era, the first of a new world and that he is so full of goodness (like Adam before his fall from God’s grace), that he is godlike, as “God created man in His own image.” (Genesis 1:27) This juxtaposition of frail and godlike images increases in regularity and in strength as the text progresses. Although the boy changes very little physically, his increased connection with God correlates with his increased agency. This becomes especially poignant as the boy grows closer to nature and absorbs elements of masculinity and femininity.

Importantly, after one particular moment in which the boy is almost killed, the man begins to impress upon the child the importance of religion. The man strokes his “pale and tangled hair” and says that he is a “golden chalice, good to house a god.” (76) Later when the boy starts to ask what their “long term goals” are and they stumble across an old man in the road, he is clearly depicted as having agency and as being strongly connected to religious sentiment. The old man prompts a highly theological conversation in which he and the man debate the existence of God. The old man contradicts himself as he notes “there is no God...and we are his prophets,” but later claims that when he saw the boy, he “thought he was an angel.” (170, 172) At this point the man turns to him and says; “what if I said that he’s a god?.” (172) Implying that the boy is an angel, is the furthest that the man could go in terms of imbuing the boy with religious prowess. One might think it absurd that the boy is a god, but when the idea is founded on other frequent references that connect the boy to religion it is an acceptable concept for the reader. Interestingly, the old man seems to accept it just as quickly saying “where men can’t live, gods fare no better... I hope that’s

not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true." (172) Also, the boy is becoming a stronger agent in that his words carry more weight with the man when he says things like "you shouldn't make fun of [the old man]." The boy is evidently tied to religious references and thus takes on religious ideals and qualities as he proceeds through the text. McCarthy does this to show the progression of the man and the boy's relationship especially in terms of agency and religion, and also to illustrate how he gains more agency yet remains unfazed by the sublime landscape.

In addition to religion, McCarthy linguistically signals the boy's growth into agency. He does so in a remarkably similar way to how he depicts the relationship between the man and the woman, as one party consistently questions whilst the other is assertive. Although the man's struggle with nature and use of religious associations signals that his relationship with nature is in transition, the relationship between the man and the boy seems very clear from the outset. The man is very much the agent in their relationship; he teaches the boy, leads the way, sets the destination and mission and is consistently direct in his dialogue. On the other hand, the boy plays with toys, seems shy and sullen, and is constantly asking questions that highlight his uncertainty. However, as the text progresses, the boy becomes gradually more certain and begins to take on agency. The gradual degeneration of the man's body is paralleled by his steady transferal of agency to the boy (which is consistent but never entire – the man retains some level of agency until his death). The dialogue between the man and the boy is especially important to this transition of agency. At the beginning of *The Road* the nature of the dialogue is sparse and succinct, which highlights the landscape (since it too, is sparse and succinct in its way), but also reveals the nature of the characters. The surety of the man seems to be the foundation stone that holds together their world as he attempts to make the child feel safe. The boy remains spellbound by his father until later in the text, yet almost immediately the reader is confronted by the man's insecurities and struggle to maintain agency. In

terms of dialogue the boy consistently highlights his fear and anxieties with his persistent questions and his need to affirm that he agrees with his father. In the first significant dialogue of the text, the boy opens;

Can I ask you something? He said.  
Yes of course.  
Are we going to die?  
Sometime. Not now.  
And we're still going south.  
Yes.  
So we'll be warm  
Yes.  
**Okay.**  
**Okay** what?  
Nothing. Just **okay**.  
Go to sleep.  
**Okay.**  
I'm going to blow out the lamp. Is that **okay**?  
Yes that's **okay**.  
And then later in the darkness: Can I ask you something?  
Yes of course you can.  
What would you do if I died?  
If you died I would want to die too.  
So you could be with me?  
Yes. So I could be with you.  
**Okay** (10-11)

McCarthy manipulates the conversation with obvious questions such as “are we going to die” which highlight the boy’s consideration of death. More subtly McCarthy also utilizes phrases like “and we’re still going south,” which are questions requiring affirmation, but disguised as statements. The boy repetitively asks “can I ask you something,” despite the positive answer which is the same each time, again highlighting his fragility. Indeed, this first passage is prefaced by a small segment in which the boy is described; “his face small in the light streaked with black from the rain like some old world thespian.” (10) Evidently the child is being crafted as a figure that lacks agency, and that

is very fearful. The child's age also comes into question, as he seems to be aged between nine and eleven, yet for a child so young, the question of death seems sincere, and he accepts the notion of his father's suicide without flinching "I would want to die too." Similarly the next few dialogues all begin with the child's questions "what is that, Papa?", "What is it, Papa?", "What is this place, Papa?", "We should go Papa. Can we go?" (19, 23, 25, 27) The boy is afraid but above all, he is extremely reliant upon his father who acts as his agent and leader. Linguistically McCarthy depicts their relationship as one between an adult agent and the boy that he protects. In this state, the boy could not possibly balance the relationship between man and nature.

However, this situation soon begins to shift. This transferal of agency begins and is acutely visible in linguistics and punctuation. Small moments of linguistic defiance from the boy surface throughout the text, the first coming early as a warning to the man. The man finds "a last half packet of cocoa powder" which he "fixed...for the boy and the poured his own cup with hot water and sat blowing the rim." (34) The man was effectively acting altruistically by giving the child the last of the cocoa and having only water for himself, yet the child scolds him; "you promised not to do that, the boy said/ What?/ You know what, Papa./ He poured the hot water back...and poured some of the cocoa into his [cup]." (34) The roles are reversed as the man asks the questions "what?," whilst the boy seizes agency and continues with "I have to watch you all the time...If you break little promises you'll break big ones. That's what you said." (34) Here the boy is evidently in charge of the situation, internalizing and utilizing the logic that the man taught him to keep his father in line. Moments such as this are rare at first but start to grow in number and frequency as they reach the coast. At one point they come across a traveller on the road, a weathered old man. The boy asks no questions but agrees with the man when he says "we can't keep him" and is given the choice to help the old man. His father is actively giving the boy more agency by noting "I don't think he should have anything. What do you want to give him?" to which the boy replies "we could cook something

on the stove. He could eat with us.” (165) The boy shows that he can make a decision when prompted and negotiate terms of a deal with his father who replies “All right he said. But then tomorrow we go on...that’s the best deal you’re going to get.” (165) The boy is allowed more agency at this point and taught a new word; “negotiate...it means talk about it some more and come up with some other deal.” (165) The literal teaching of the word coupled with the real situation in which it can be applied shows that the boy is growing into his role as an agent, even if he does so hesitantly. McCarthy linguistically shows the boy gaining more agency through his development of the boy’s assertive speech patterns and punctuation.

Similar growth into agency can be witnessed in the boy’s approach to responsibility and the post-world landscape. For instance, there is a large shift in the boy’s feelings towards his father’s gun. At first, the boy was unable to hold the gun or accept the prospect that he might have to use it on himself. The man “took the boy’s hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered...the boy was terrified.../ I don’t know what to do, Papa. I don’t know what to do.” (112-3) The boy swiftly changes his tune, as later in the text he goes foraging and exploring by himself and is given the gun once more. At this juncture there is an entire role reversal taking place. The man awakens feeling afraid because “when he woke the boy was not there” at which point the child returns “at a run” calling to him (178);

Papa, he called. There’s a train in the woods.

A train?

Yes.

A real train?

Yes. Come on.

You didn’t go up to it did you?

No. Just a little. Come on.

There’s nobody there?

No...

Is there an engine?

Yes. A big Diesel (178)

Roles are clearly exchanged, with the man asking many hesitant and startled questions that evidently display his fear. He seems confused at first asking if the boy saw “a real train?,” and worriedly queries if the child went “up to” the train. In contrast the child is assertive and lucid. He shows comprehension, caution and control over the entire situation. He demonstrates that he has absorbed much of what the man has taught him, only approaching the train “a little,” just enough to identify the engine as a “big Diesel.” This identification is quite a feat, especially for the boy who recognizes the old world as “not even a memory,” and is strong evidence for the teachings of the man, and their influence over the child (54). The man recognises that the child is becoming stronger and a more active agent than himself; “he handed the boy the pistol. You take it, Papa, the boy said/ No that’s not the deal...the boy rose and put the pistol in his belt.” (179) By using the phrase “the deal,” the man echoes the earlier scene in which the child is taught negotiation. He is reminded about what the deal means and remembers that there will be no other “deal.” By accepting the pistol from his father, the boy also accepts the responsibilities that come with it, the responsibilities that a short time before caused him to feel terror and cry out “I don’t know what to do,” which is the ultimate admission of submission (113). McCarthy has finely honed the relationship between the man and the boy to demonstrate the transferal of agency. This is especially important to the movement within the triad; the man’s instilling of the post-world normative structures in the child helps create the carefully crafted boy who becomes an agent of both nature and the man. In representing both he acts as a buffer between the two, and allows the man to reach for a connection with nature.

It is important to note that the man is happy to surrender agency to the boy, as long as the child is like himself, making logical decisions and demonstrating his learning. Later in the text the boy has gained agency but seems resentful towards the man, as his naturalistic leanings surface. The

man becomes confused and as a result loses even more agency to the boy's stubborn silences, little realizing that the boy is a combination of himself and nature, and thus the man finds him incomprehensible or perplexing at times. There are many ways in which the boy mirrors nature in terms of agency, and many of them are seen through the man's eyes. For instance, the boy is described multiple times as seeming "alien" to the man. He also progressively disconnects from childhood things such as his toys, music and dreams or nightmares. The man watches each of these changes with concern. The boy even comes to accept the landscape more, in a way that he never had before, learning to disconnect from his father's fear and accept the sublime landscape as it is; thus allowing him to grow closer to nature. Moments of growth such as this are significant, as they signal the boy's progression towards an androgynous balance between humankind and nature.

The boy is certainly an agent of nature, as well as of man. Within the text the man is consistently watching the child, and occasionally, despite himself, feels very alienated from his son: "the nights were blinding cold and the casket black...the boy's candlecoloured skin was all but translucent. With his great staring eyes he'd the look of an alien." (129) McCarthy brings the boy's appearance into a description of the sublime landscape, implying that he is part of the landscape, and as distant or "alien" to the man as everything else. Later, the situation is reversed when the man realizes that "he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed." (153) Evidently, the man acknowledges his own strangeness to the child who knows no other world than this as he was born after the clocks stopped. Indeed, in this sense the boy is sublime, as time plays no factor in his life, he understands that "ever" seems to be a long time, but in reality "ever is no time at all." (28) The boy is partly sublime in his nature and birth, thus he sometimes seems incredibly different to the man. His "alien" appearance is one that mirrors the landscape, allowing him to be physically a part of nature as well as mentally. Here we can clearly see the boy's natural side illustrated.



McCarthy reveals a connection between nature and the boy is revealed in his growth towards true agency. He had old toys that he saved in the beginning like his “yellow truck” that “he’d forgot he had.” (35), and a flute that his father carved for him with which he played “a formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin.” (77) In these early scenes the boy is very afraid and under the agency of the man. Later however, the toys and music are gone, replaced with an assertive repose “what happened to your flute?/ I threw it away./ You threw it away?/ Yes.” (159) Evidently the toys that connect the boy to his childhood have become redundant as he grows into agency and develops a stronger relationship with the land. The man’s confusion is clear, but, as the boy grows more alien to the man, he becomes more and more a part of nature. The strongest illustration of the boy’s movement towards nature involves his dreams.

McCarthy has used dreams and hallucination to great effect in many of his previous texts. *The Orchard Keeper*, *The Gardener’s Son*, *Orange and White* and *Blood Meridian* are all highlighted by critical scholars such as Dianne C. Luce and William Prather as texts that “embodied [McCarthy’s] meditation on the value and difficulty of recapturing the past.” (Luce 21) With a history of using dreamscapes to illustrate transitions in his texts and highlight the “the paradoxical frailty of memory,” it seems fitting that McCarthy would revive this literary trope to great effect in *The Road* (21). Dreams plague the boy throughout the text, yet it is his reaction and narration of these dreams to the man that uniquely frames and captures his growing relationship with nature. A whimpering awakens the man in the night, and he comforts the boy “Shh, he said. Shh. It’s ok.” (36) The boy speaks shakily;

I had a bad dream...Should I tell you what it was?  
If you want to.

I had this penguin that you wound up and it would waddle and flap its flippers...we were in that house that we used to live in and it came around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary.

Okay.

It was a lot scarier in the dream...why did I have that scary dream?

I don't know. But it's ok now...Go to sleep.

The boy didn't answer. Then he said: The winder wasn't turning (36-7)

Classic signs of fear and weakness are exhibited by the boy, especially through his consistent uncertain questions “why did I have that scary dream?” and his recognisably childish language “I had a bad dream.” Importantly, the dream itself and the boy’s last words combine to implicitly explain the child’s fear. The penguin seems to represent the boy himself. In actuality, he does not fear the penguin itself as is first suggested by the summary of his dream. The boy’s fear stems from the fact that “nobody had wound it up,” and that “the winder wasn’t turning.” Agency is being specifically dealt with in this passage, because the penguin has no agent, there is no one in control of it, no one to wind the winder and set it moving, yet it moves. It is the disembodied, disconnected, awkward waddle that is grotesque and frightening to the child. In his dream the child is recognising his own lack of power and control over himself and feels the scariness and fear that accompanies an utter lack of agency; this is the very same fear that the man battles every day in order to maintain his footing in the sublime landscape that envelops them. In this early stage of the text the boy seems unbalanced and unable to sustain any kind of connection between nature and humankind.

McCarthy used the boy’s first dream to illustrate his dependency upon the man, and disconnection from the natural landscape around them. However, as the text progresses and the boy grows closer to nature, so do his nightmarish visions. Shortly after the boy first begins to assert his own agency by finding the train, he has another dream. This time the man is not awoken by whimpering; instead he wakes to stoke the fire and finds the boy “sitting up wrapped in his blanket.” (183) This time the dialogue evidences a strong shift in their relationship:

what is it?  
Nothing. I had a bad dream.  
What did you dream about?  
Nothing.  
Are you ok?  
No.  
He put his arms around him and held him. It's okay he said.  
I was crying. But you didn't wake up.  
I'm sorry. I was just so tired.  
I meant in the dream (183)

Inevitably, as the boy's agency increases, he becomes surly towards the man at times as is illustrated by his stubborn reply of "nothing." The dream itself pre-empts the man's death and the boy's fear in the dream echoes his earlier fear that there will be no one to act as agent for him and be in control. However, his outward appearance, sitting stoically by the fire, is very different. His childish language is spiked with adolescent assertiveness and desire to seem unafraid: "nothing. I had a bad dream." Furthermore, the boy's choice to sit along with the fire rather than wake the man shows a conscious decision to seek solace in nature. Moments after this experience his growth away from the man becomes clear. He asks the man "there are other good guys. You said so...so where are they?" to which the man replies that he doesn't know but that he thinks it's true. His uncertainty comes out as he accuses the boy: "you don't believe me," to which the boy retorts "I always believe you...I do. I have to." (184-5) The boy is acknowledging that he has no one else to tell him anything contrary to what the man says. He is implicitly pointing out that the man could be lying and that he would never know, but that he is wary of the fact and has recognised it; he only believes the man because he has to. Here McCarthy is clearly illustrating that the boy has a mind of his own that he is slowly becoming the agent of. The man no longer dictates the way the boy thinks, and is no longer his "world entire." (6) Nature is creeping in, subverting some of the man's teachings, and specifically undermining those that are the products of his fear. McCarthy uses

dreams to great effect to show the boy's growing connection to nature, and movement away from certain teachings of fear that his father instilled in him. The boy is gradually learning what to retain of his father's teachings, and what to accept as new from nature, creating a balance between the two.

It is evident from analysis of the triad structure that each party has its part to play in the movement of the structure and that characteristically there is evidence of a struggle for power. This struggle is occasionally overlaid by religious elements which aid in depicting the boy as a mediator and balanced figure. However, the question still remains as to *how* the triad accomplishes the man's connection with nature, and where androgyny fits into the structure. Androgyny within the triad works primarily as a balancing agent and is embodied by the child. This mechanism stabilizes him and makes the boy a stronger agent of both nature and of humanity. The boy, as mentioned earlier, is part nature and part man. He is a combination of both the feminine and the masculine in a physical sense as all humans are, but it is his mental balance between the two, the way in which he absorbs and endorses both parties that the boy can be seen as androgynous. His body may not physically represent this, but his actions and his mental balance do.

Dreams also come into the understanding of androgyny. The boy grows ever closer to nature, and gradually grasps that there is a balance between the two in his mind. He chooses never to communicate his last dream to the man, but it significantly shows how man and nature can come together. The boy "woke from a dream and would not tell [the man] what it was." (189) McCarthy pre-emptively awakens the child with a description of a distorted dreamscape that the reader can assume to be the boy's dream:

Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy's age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside...and brought to light a great bolus of serpents...dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly...Like the bowels of some great beast exposed...The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be... As they

were mute there were no screams of pain...the men watched them  
burn...writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves...they  
disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go  
home to their suppers (188-9)

The boy is having highly disturbing dreams that depict men and boys of an old world gathering to burn out a nest of snakes. He is surrounded by boys his own age in the dream, and they partake in the killing of hundreds of snakes as he watches before each leaving for home. The infinite “silence” of the men and snakes creates an eerily sublime image that lingers in the mind. Indeed, the vast amount of snakes and image of a bleak winter field and dusk conjure images of the sublime landscape. In this dream the boy is partaking in the destruction of “evil,” symbolized as snakes, the traditional devil’s advocate that first tempted man in the Garden of Eden. This imagery connects with his father’s godly ideals, and hints that this action is good in some way. However, the grotesquery of the language such as “dull tubes,” “bowels of some great beast” and “sluggishly...writhe and blacken” shows that there is something inherently wrong with the scene. The boy seems to see that in their mutual “silence,” the snakes and the men become one. Thus as the men burn the snakes, they also burn themselves. McCarthy chooses this metaphor to comment on modern society, which uses nature indiscriminately to its own detriment. The significance of this dream is clear in that at last, the boy seems to have found a strange balance or correlation between humankind and nature. Thus, his mind can now be described as androgynous.

As we saw in the introduction, androgyny is the balance of masculine and feminine in the human psyche. The triad relies upon this delicate balance. In *The Road* the boy is the third party in the triad structure and actively creates an androgynous balance in his psyche between the man (masculine) and nature (feminine) and essentially ‘becomes’ their androgynous union. This enables the man to connect with nature and achieve the primary Romantic goal to connect with nature.

This is important to bear in mind when analysing the boy's dreams, as they show the androgynous union in action.

How the boy's dream initially comes together is unclear, yet it clearly helps the boy reach a mental balance. The figures in the snake dream mirror one another in a disturbing way that is only fully realised pages later when the man and the boy come across "passions of travellers abandoned on the road," then "a mile on they began to come upon the dead. Figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves. Mouths howling." (190) The man earlier proclaimed that "the things you put in your head are there forever...you forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget," thus he tells the child to take his hand to be guided "I don't think you should see this." (12) The boy echoes his words that "what you put in your head is there forever," but this time turns to the man and says "its ok...they are already there," implying that the dead are already in his mind. The man says "I don't want you to look," but the boy counters his concern claiming "they'll still be there." (190-1) Evidently the boy sees the burning snakes of his dream and the burning men come together as one; thus man and nature are one within his mind in an androgynous blend. Indeed, the boy "so strangely untroubled" suggests that they "just go on...passing [the dead] in silence down that silent corridor through the drifting ash where they struggled forever in the roads cold coagulate." (191) McCarthy uses language specifically here to show that the boy is actively accepting the landscape around him and accepting that death is part of the sublime landscape that he lives in. Furthermore, McCarthy strengthens the boy's connection with nature, but also acknowledges his relationship with the man, as the boy never forgets the rules; thus he is androgynous in his thinking. At the end of this sequence, it is clear that the boy is better equipped to find equilibrium between man and nature and help the two connect.

By the end of the text, the boy's situation has drastically changed from the beginning. As his father is lying "cold and stiff" on the roadside, he realises that his earlier dream in which he was

crying but the man “didn’t wake up” has come true (183). Interestingly, this is the only point in the text that names are even mentioned, the boy knelt beside his father “and said his name over and over again.” (281) The name is never explicitly said, but the boy’s kneeling stance and repetition of the name reveals his internalisation of ritual and litanies. Three days later, the boy, having not left the man’s side, a new man comes down the road to offer him a place in his family tribe: “we have a little boy and we have a little girl.” (284) To the boy’s worried question “are you carrying the fire?,” the new man answers “yes.” (284) The boy warily accepts and is given a moment to mourn before joining them. Again this exchange reveals a dependency upon the structures that his father created to maintain agency, thus the boy, and his new family that “carry the fire” are a part of the human struggle to connect with nature and maintain agency in a sublime landscape.

It is important that from this moment fourth, the boy frequently connects the man and nature in a balanced and natural way. The man may have died, but his connection with nature is still facilitated by and lives on within the boy. In the final passages of *The Road* the boy’s perspective has taken over from the man’s. However, the boy speaks to the man in death, just as the man used to speak to god, and says “I’ll talk to you every day...And I won’t forget. No matter what.” (286) By communicating with the man in this way, the boy shows that he has internalised the man’s ideas concerning God, and that the man is still part of him. In the penultimate and final paragraphs boy creates a union between man and nature that is almost perfect:

He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget. The woman said that this was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath...[passing] from man to man through all of time. Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains... on their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming... 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 (287)

The landscape is visibly vast, ageless (infinite) and powerful as the “deep glens...hummed with mystery.” The sublime element of painful pleasure is also recognisable in the beauty of the “brook trout,” they are creatures that have beautiful patterns of “the world in its becoming” upon their backs; yet, they also capture the loss that has occurred in the world that may not be “made right again.” This truly sublime imagery is blended with the boy’s move away from praying to God, and toward speaking to his father instead. The man is never forgotten, and becomes the figure that the boy “talk[s] to.” Furthermore, the fact that the woman (of the family) speaks is highly significant she “said that this was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath.” Here the ideal of androgyny is crystallized as the man’s mental structures are perfectly intertwined with the woman’s language and the natural landscape. She facilitates the meeting of boy and nature, allowing him to reach the balance between man and nature. The family and the boy are “carrying the fire” or the “breath” of God, a construct that the man used to maintain his sense of agency; yet they live in the “deep glens” near “mountain stream” that are natural images permeated by the sublime. The two images are intricately interwoven, as humanity and the boy’s sense of agency become connected to the landscape. The man is prayed to and is thus metaphysically a part of the boy’s mind, and as the boy no longer fears nature, he is enabling the meeting of man and nature through his (or masculine agency and feminine agency), and he is androgynously enabling a union between the two. The boy’s mind acts as a buffer between the two forces, effectively neutralizing them and allowing them to meet through the carefully crafted structures of his mind.

### **Conclusion**

McCarthy’s text is built carefully upon the sublime power structures of the triad. The boy acts as a balancing agent and buffer in the post-apocalyptic end-world; gradually assuming agency from man and nature, he blends religious connotations with naturalistic ones to end up with an androgynous



union between man and nature, negotiated through man-made structures. Wordsworth notes in his poem *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*; “the Child is the father of the man” stressing that children have a more direct appreciation of the natural sublime than adults (which was a common belief of romantic poets) (1.1). This is illustrated to great effect by McCarthy, as the boy is able to accept both man and nature in equal measure whereas his father struggled a great deal. Due to the presence of the triad and the use of the sublime aesthetic, it can be deduced that McCarthy’s text is evidently a part of the same epistemic movement that captured the sublime Romantic poets of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. As we will see in the next chapter, there are many differences between *The Road* and *Mont Blanc*, yet their similarities stand testament to the epistemic relationship that the two texts share.

### Chapter Three: Mont Blanc

Percy Bysshe Shelley's text *Mont Blanc* is a deeply sublime envisioning of the Vale of Chamouni in France in the summer of 1816. The poem captures the sublime and mutable landscapes that fascinated those who travelled to see them during the Romantic Era. Shelley wrote the poem when he travelled to Chamouni, and was staying in the Villa Diodati with Mary Shelley (his wife), Lord Byron (his friend), Byron's personal doctor, Dr John Polidari and Mary Shelley's step sister Clair Clairmont. The summer of 1816 saw encroaching clouds creeping across Europe that had erupted from an Indonesian volcano called Mt. Tambora in late 1815. The ash of the volcano made the sky black and reached the Vale early in the summer of 1816. The summer was known at the time as the Dark Summer, and it saw the birth of incredible and revolutionary literature. Byron's poem *Darkness*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Dr Diodati's *Vampyre* text (the first of its kind and Draculas predecessor), and *Mont Blanc* were all written during this period. Each of these texts carries a dark and sublime message within it. It seems that these great minds were inspired by the darkness that cast its shadow across mankind, and intrigued by its natural origins.

In this chapter, I shall demonstrate how Shelley's text works with the triad theory, and how nature and the speaker are balanced through an androgynous mechanism. Shelley does address some of the issues that McCarthy addresses, but there are also some clear differences. In *Mont Blanc*, nature, the speaker, and the third party (pantheism), all show distinct differences, yet they are still recognisable as functioning elements of the triad. The first key difference is in regards to landscape. In *The Road* the landscape is scorched and eschatologically depicted as dead, with no natural growth anywhere save a few shrivelled mushrooms. In contrast, *Mont Blanc* depicts a vibrant natural landscape with leaves and flowers, crashing rivers, ice, sunbeams, pine trees, rainbows and fields amongst other things. The landscape is evidently a living, breathing entity. It would seem that these

two opposite depictions of nature are irreconcilable. How could they possibly both work in similar fashion with the triad theory? However, despite their differences, the two forms of nature are both depicted as female, and in addition to this, they both have the same overwhelming, sublime presence. A dead landscape can be just as sublime and beautiful as a living one, and, as is shown in these two texts, sublimity can be explored in a multitude of ways.

Another clear deviation from what we have seen in *The Road* is the response of the protagonist in *Mont Blanc*. In *The Road* we saw the construction and utilization of survival structures, as the man attempted to maintain a sense of control in the wake of such overwhelming power. He employed tactics such as imbuing the boy with god-like qualities, and telling himself false truths in order to operate under sublime conditions. In the case of *Mont Blanc* the protagonist, the speaker of the poem, rarely attempts to combat the overwhelming force of nature. This is primarily because of the third party Shelley employs; pantheism disrupts the overwhelming action of nature, thus making mankind's resistance unnecessary.

The third party, pantheism, is different from the boy in McCarthy's text. Some of the most startling differences lie in the fact that pantheism has no physical form; that is to say, it is a metaphysical "spirit" that inhabits all things. Due to this physical difference, pantheism is less able to embody characteristics of both humans and nature. Like the boy in *The Road*, pantheism does not slowly absorb traits of each party and physically embody them; rather, pantheism inherently becomes part of the speaker and nature whilst being absorbed into them. Pantheism can be described as a web, creating connections between each party subtly and allowing elements of sublimity and humanity to meet through this web in a balanced way. Yet, despite these differences between third parties, both are still able to achieve the state of mental androgynous balance.

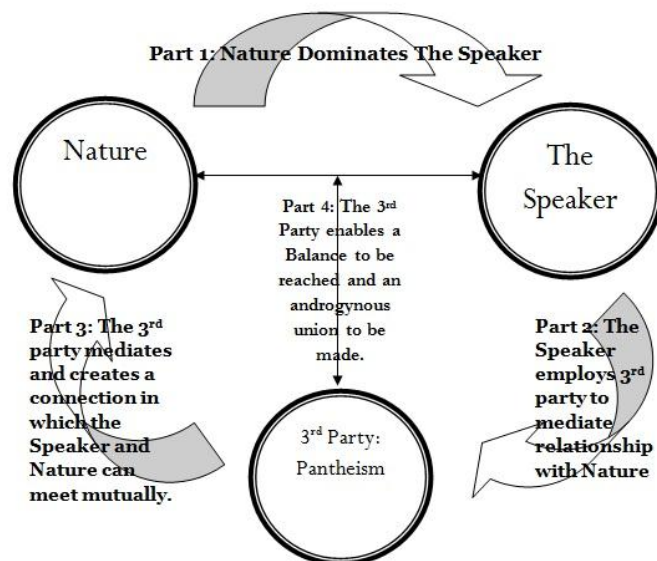
A stark contrast between the texts is the role and activity that the third parties play. The boy in McCarthy's text starts out as a timid figure with no agency and no ideals of his own. He gradually

grows into his relationship with the man, and with the landscape that surrounds him; thus the boy is ineffective in terms of balancing the man and nature for the earlier sections of the book. This coupled with flashbacks tell us that the man has been in a predicament for some time as nature continuously overwhelms him; this in turn explains his use of survival structures. In contrast, Shelley introduces pantheism early in *Mont Blanc*, and it functions at full capacity for the entire poem (i.e. it does not grow or develop into a being that can balance nature and humankind, it already is at that point as the poem opens)

The differences between the landscapes, the man and the speaker, and pantheism and the boy, will inform our understanding of how the triad works in Shelley’s text. The triad theory works with Shelley’s text just as it works with McCarthy’s but with some key differences, all of which can be traced back to those fundamental variances mentioned above. With the variances between *Mont Blanc* and *The Road* established, we can now explore how the triad functions within Shelley’s poem, and establish whether Shelley manages to depict the connection between humankind and nature.

### The Triad and an Introduction to Pantheism

*Mont Blanc*, Shelley’s five-part poem, follows the traditional romantic characterisation of nature as feminine. Early in the text Shelley writes: “thy giant brood of pines around thee cling”, implying that nature is the mother of trees, and that they are her “brood” or offspring (II. 20). Nature is clearly a female within the poem, holding to the Romantic tradition of the time



period. In terms of the triad, it is important that nature is female, as tension builds between the male speaker and the intimidating female counterpart.

In the triad, the key element of pantheism must be defined in order to fully understand its working within the text, and in order to acknowledge that the application and adoption of pantheism was a personal choice within the Romantics which is illustrated by its popularity in the second wave especially with authors such as Coleridge, Byron and Keats. For our purposes, pantheism should be understood as a natural spirit of “divine unity”. It is important in regards to the operation of the triad in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*.

Shelley envisions the natural landscape of Chamouni, France, as a sublime and awe inspiring place. Because Chamouni is grand and beautiful, it lacks the desperation and alien hostility of the post-world landscape that we see in *The Road*. Despite surface differences in the natural landscape in their works (McCarthy’s being mostly dead and Shelley’s very alive), the poets deal with nature in very similar ways. Some might argue that Shelley’s speaker seems less overwhelmed than the man in *The Road*, yet, the power of the landscape is equal to that of the road: it is merely the speaker’s mental position that shifts from one text to the next. The speaker in *Mont Blanc* is indeed overwhelmed and startled, yet simultaneously he still lives in a world where he can find food easily, and need not struggle to survive; thus, the tenor of the poem seems somewhat gentler in comparison to the harshness of McCarthy’s landscape. The less foreboding landscape of *Mont Blanc* explains how Shelley creates such a clear bond between humans and nature by the end of the poem.

The mental shift that is manifest between the two texts demonstrates Shelley’s subtlety in utilizing a third party that can mediate between humans and nature. Instead of literally personifying the third party or using a physical vessel like the boy, Shelley uses pantheism as a third party. Not only is pantheism a chief concern among Romantic poets, but Shelley enables pantheism to form a metaphysical interchange that can literally penetrate both nature and man, consuming both. Creating

an androgynous entity in which both sexes unite. This is important because by intertwining with the speaker and nature separately, pantheism allows everything to connect through itself. This close merging between nature, pantheism, and humans makes it incredibly difficult to extract pantheism and explore it properly. However, when they are successfully separated, it becomes clear that pantheism makes nature more open and accessible to the speaker of the poem, even to the extent that they could be considered interdependent.

The discussion of nature is made especially difficult because the inclusion of pantheism permeates the text of *Mont Blanc*. Indeed, the first line is both inherently sublime, and inherently pantheistic. The infinite and vast elements of the sublime lend themselves quite easily to notions of pantheism. Additionally, as I shall show, the crux of the speaker's issue with nature is that he can partially relate to it, in the sense that nature is mutable, just as humans are. Yet, he struggles, as nature is also eternal, and is governed by eternal laws. For instance, clouds are considered mutable with ever changing formations and cycle of evaporation. However, despite this dynamic movement, clouds will always be part of the earth and recycled; at some point, during the perpetual movements of nature, they will re-join the earth and begin the cycle again. For Shelley, there is no guarantee that this will happen for mankind. One reason Shelley and other Romantics adopted pantheism was their fear of the momentary flicker that constitutes human life in relation to the eternal geographical shifts of earth's life. They sought to connect themselves to nature in order to become part of these greater earthly cycles. In *Mont Blanc*, nature is able to continue in a wild yet constant formation despite its mutability it follows the timeless laws. However, the speaker is not sure whether he will continue in this way, as he struggles to connect with the core of nature, the timeless, immutable, sublime centre that dominates all things.

### First Party: Nature (The Overwhelming Force)

To clearly understand the shifts in power within *Mont Blanc* and see how Nature works as an overwhelming force, one must first chart the relationships within the triad. The structure of *Mont Blanc* is fairly simple; the text is a poem in five parts, each part signalling a change in thought, scene or moment. Importantly, nature, the speaker, and pantheism each have roles that fluctuate in terms of power, thus it is important to know which party is dominant and which subverted in each section of the poem. For example, in part one, pantheism is immediately active and fully present, whereas the speaker's voice is hard to discern as he relishes the transience of nature, (which is itself, overwhelmingly present) In part two, there is a slight shift as the speaker's voice actively acknowledges itself as "I". However, nature is still present and overwhelming; pantheism rushes into a "rapid interchange" between the speaker and nature, mediating the clash of active voices. By part three, a distinctly feminine aspect of nature subdues the speaker, and pantheism is only subtly active. Interestingly, the strength of Shelley's third party, pantheism, gradually comes out in part four, as nature is consistently counteracted despite the speaker's overwhelmed state. The final part completes the shift from nature as the dominating force, to that of a balanced keel. Pantheism is working to its fullest, the speaker has a clear and strong voice and nature is present and powerful, but no longer overwhelming. Thus, nature and the speaker meet as equals as the text draws to a close. This shift in power will inform our understanding of how the speaker reacts within the text. For instance in part one and two and four, parts in which the speaker is overwhelmed, his connection to transience could be mistaken for a strong connection with nature; however, it is clear that he has a weaker voice and is unable to access the deeper meaning and laws of nature.

Early in the poem the overwhelming sense of nature combines with the idea of the speaker's transience. Transience becomes prominent and continues into later stanzas as is demonstrated in part four of the poem: "Frost and Sun in scorn of mortal power." (4. 103) Here the sublime, cold

landscape literally “scorns” the power of humankind. “Frost and Sun” are both capitalised which implies that they are living beings, or elements of nature that act wilfully toward the derision of humanity. The depiction of nature until this point is incredibly hostile; yet, there are some forms of nature that the speaker feels an affinity with. One short passage depicts both forms of nature in relation to the speaker, as he declares: “The race/ Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling/ Vanish, like smoke before the tempest’s stream.” (4. 117-19) Force and power are shown as “man flies far in dread” from the ever creeping “glaciers” that move “like snakes that watch their prey.” (4.100-1) The important thing to note here is the lasting nature of glaciers that sometimes creep forward for thousands of years. However, another kind of nature is present in this stanza, which makes the mutability of nature explicit. Shelley depicts man’s dwellings and livelihoods as things that can “vanish like smoke before the tempest’s stream”. Smoke is a natural occurrence, but differs from the “tempest’s stream” (which is the glacier), in terms of its mutability, that is, its short-lived time in the world. This is vital to understand, as the speaker feels connected to nature in that he is mutable. However, unlike the clouds and mutable beauty of nature, the speaker does not know if he will connect with the larger *power* of nature, the eternal, and this is a terrifying concept; for if the speaker cannot connect, or link to the everlasting power of the sublime landscape, will he be able to join with all things? Or will he expire like a flame that flickers momentarily in the darkness? It is mutability that concerns Shelley, as the speaker can find comradeship with the brief passing of clouds or smoke, but not truly connect with the eternal laws of nature. The speaker is able to relate only to mutability; the eternal laws, coupled with the sublime, overwhelm the speaker inordinately.

Nature in its mutability is not as overwhelming as the eternal laws of sublime nature, yet mutable nature serves to emphasise the speaker’s inability to withstand the larger power of sublime nature. This is reflected in *Mont Blanc* as a physical piece of written poetry, as it shows the two sides of nature as the speaker sees them. First, the rush and mutable power of the river is depicted by the



speaker as transient and powerful, like the coursing of blood, through a human body as it rushes down the mountain through streams and valleys and brooks only to expire as steam or disappear into a vast cavern:

Now dark – now glittering –no...  
Now lending splendour...  
Where waterfalls around it leap...  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
...ceaselessly bursts and raves (I.3-11)

The river Arve is seemingly unbound and absolutely free to tumble through down the slippery slopes of Mont Blanc. Not a single drop of water that rushes by will ever be the same as the last. As the river rushes by it transfigures throwing up shadows “now dark” and spray “now glittering-no”. The transitory nature of the river Arve is emphasised by the word “no” that is swiftly attached to the transfigurations. Evidently the speaker is transfixed by the morphing and mutable shapes that pass before him, such as the “glittering” “waterfalls”, and how much they resemble the fleetingness of human existence. The dynamism of the river is also present as the water “leaps”, “bursts”, and “raves” highlighting again the transient nature of the river as its energy expires into a “deep Ravine.” (II. 12) The very form of the text mirrors this in that there is no visible rhyme scheme or strong format. The speaker sees that his life is like the river in its transience “like the flame/ of lightning through the tempest” brief and insubstantial (II. 18-9). At this point, the speaker is connecting with nature’s mutability, yet is still struggling to understand the deeper natural laws.

In order to determine whether the speaker can connect with nature, we must first attempt to see how the triad is enabled in *Mont Blanc* and how nature acts as an overwhelming force relative to the speaker. The most startling initial indicator of nature overwhelms the speaker, is his silence until halfway through part two of the poem. The speaker’s first words are “Dizzy Ravine! And when I gaze on thee/ I see, as in a trance sublime and strange.” (Shelley 2.34-5) Immediately the speaker

identifies himself as overwhelmed; the adjective “Dizzy” modifies “Ravine”, revealing the human sensation of vertigo at great heights. Vertigo, the sensation of unsteadiness, indicates a lack of control that arises as a reaction to the sublimity of the Ravine. Furthermore, the speaker goes on to explicitly note that he is “in a trance sublime and strange”, thus implicating the sublime as an element of his strange “trance”. A trance is “a state of abstraction.” (OED online), showing that the speaker’s mind is directly influenced by the sublime landscape of the “Ravine” in an adverse fashion, as he is unable to control himself mentally or his surroundings. Shelley litters *Mont Blanc* with moments such as this in order to illustrate the overwhelming power of the nature’s sublime aesthetic.

Larger power struggles between nature and the speaker within the text are illustrated in the third part of *Mont Blanc*, in which Shelley describes the mountain’s surrounding Mont Blanc as unearthly and alien forms. The speaker himself is being entirely overwhelmed. In doing so he explores the mountain’s sublimity, yet also reveals the speaker’s discomfort in the presence of the natural sublime:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,  
Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene—  
Its subject mountains the unearthly forms  
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between  
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps (III. 60-64)

Here, the speaker describes Mont Blanc as “piercing”, “still”, and “serene” like a monarch sitting upon a throne. These elements show a quiet and sublime image of Mont Blanc, as it is touching and becoming part of the “infinite sky”. This closely echoes Burke’s criteria for sublimity; Burke defines vastness as huge heights or extreme depths such as a mountain reaching “far, far” above. Further, the mountain is part of an infinite whole; thus, it is a natural and sublime object. The metaphor of Mont Blanc as a monarch is extended as the speaker sees Mont Blanc’s “subject mountains”

surrounding in strange and “unearthly” formations. The great mountains that have sublime elements, such as “unfathomable deeps”, all bow to the grandeur and prestige of Mont Blanc despite themselves. Importantly, the speaker witnesses the great sublime mountains as Mont Blanc’s subjects regardless of their immensity and sublimity. Thus, the speaker himself must feel incredibly small in the wake of such power that even “ice and rock” “pile” up to overwhelm him. In addition to this sense of overwhelming power, the mountains that surround Mont Blanc are described as “unearthly”, showing how removed the speaker feels from nature. Alienation is clearly felt by the speaker as he looks upon the commanding landscape before him that he cannot control. Moments such as this reiterate the necessity of the poet’s quest to reconnect humans with nature in the Romantic Era, as Shelley directly presents the alienation induced by nature.

Feminine nature overwhelms the speaker in the text, highlighting his inability to connect, in the form of the “old Earthquake-daemon” who “taught her young ruin.” (3.72-3) She is clearly a violent and powerful ancient force that birthed great monsters that shattered and tore the landscape as if it were a game. The speaker asks, “were these their toys? Or did a sea/ of fire envelop once this silent snow?/ None can reply – all seems eternal now.” (3. 73-5) Evidently, the speaker is imagining the history of the landscape that produces such a sublime effect in him. Furthermore, the question “were these their toys?” implies first, that the daemons are so immense they can play with a mammoth natural substance as though it were a child’s “toy”; and second, that the speaker, despite imagining these beings, is unable to conceptualise them with understanding of their nature, thus his mind is unable to process or fully realise the immensity of nature. This is tackled again by Shelley when the infinite element of sublimity aids nature in overwhelming the speaker. With the statement “none can reply”, the speaker admits his inability to find answers, and ultimately his lack of power over the landscape; this leads to “all seems eternal now”, which effectively solidifies the idea of human powerlessness. Infinity takes the speaker’s weakness and expands it, showing him that he can

and will never know, and that he will continue to struggle against the feminine nature with which he cannot connect; there will never be a “reply”.

The speaker’s insignificance is further highlighted by Shelley in light of geological time and is emphasised by connecting geology to nature as a feminine figure. The Romantic Poets had just begun to grasp geology with Georges Cuvier, who established the scientific discipline of stratigraphy with William Smith. Stratigraphy, the study of layering in sedimentary and volcanic rocks, was a major development for geological dating in 1811. Natural science led poets such as Shelley to realise the insignificance of humans in comparison to mother nature’s long life. This is reflected in the phrase “all is eternal now”, as the speaker is highlighting that he can and will never know, as such things are lost in the shadows of eternity (3. 75). From such a description of nature, one might assume that Romantic poets such as Shelley were attempting to make women more powerful by aligning them with strong natural forces. However, it is pertinent to note that nature still takes on the simplified “nurturing” role of mother to her “young” (3. 73). Despite the incredible power depicted, her power is sublimated to her young who “ruin” the landscape. This is clear evidence of Shelley attempting to temper nature, and align it with feminine characteristics to make the landscape less overwhelming. Once again Shelley depicts nature’s overwhelming size and force using sublime elements such as infinity to reinforce the sense of magnitude and demonstrate the insignificance of humankind in terms of earth’s geological age.

Nature’s power and inaccessibility are illustrated by Shelley in part four of the poem. Nature is clearly overwhelming the speaker, which creates tension upon which the triad is formed. Mankind’s short and transient life is illustrated in comparison to the endlessness of Mont Blanc itself, which stands above them all. The depiction serves to juxtapose the two images and emphasise the disparity between the lengths of life:

The works and ways of man, their death and birth...  
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
Are born and die; revolve and subside, and swell.  
Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible (IV. 92-5)

Here the terms “birth and death” of “man” and “born or die” are used as bookends to emphasise the transitory nature of humankind’s existence. Furthermore, active words such as “sound”, “toil”, “move”, and “breathe” all carry the weight of an action behind them, that is to say all sounds eventually cease, all toils are eventually halted, all movements have a point at which they finish, and all breaths are exhaled; they are mutable, and there is an end to each and every one of these actions, just as there is an end to man’s life. Thus, Shelley emphasises humankind’s vulnerability and temporality. In contrast, Mont Blanc has no birth that can be remembered by anyone in living memory, and, it seems to be perpetual in form. Thousands if not millions of years ago the mountain was created through a clash of tectonic plates; thus, it “dwells apart” from these transient beings such as humans, proving itself to be “inaccessible” to those who wish to connect with nature. Nature is evidently an overwhelming and inaccessible force for humankind.

The depiction of nature and its eternal laws emphasises the might and sublimity of nature’s painful yet pleasurable, vast, infinite, and powerful side. However, there is a deeper structural sense of order within the text. The poem, like the river itself, *seems* to have no rhyme or reason, that is, there is no specific rhyme scheme or regularity aside from basic broken blank verse. However, there is a subtle but steady pulse that the poem swiftly follows. As the poem begins, lines four and five end in a rhyming couplet “secret springs/...tribute brings” as do lines forty two and three “and now rest/...unbidden guest.” (I. 4-5) Irregular rhymes continue throughout the poem, consistently in that there is at least one half-rhymed or fully rhymed couplet in each part; for example in part five “thee!/ sea” rhyme (V. 141-2). In many cases, rhyme is disguised in extended blank-verse coupled with enjambment:

Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the **sweep**  
Of the ethereal waterfall, whose **veil**  
Robes some unsculptured image; the strange **sleep**  
Which when the voices of the desert **fail**  
Wraps all in its own deep eternity (II. 25-9)

Here a transient image is underpinned by a stronger rhythmic rhyme that imperceptibly shows nature's power over even the most transient of moments like a rainbow in an "ethereal waterfall".

The natural patterns and laws of nature are subtly reflected within the structure and form of the text itself. Shelley has included a subtle, deep rhythm in his text, which eventually emphasises the overwhelming power of nature. He chose this style, instead of writing within more rigid guidelines such as the sonnet form or a quatern, to reflect the landscape itself: a landscape that wavers in the speaker's mind between wild transience and unutterable profundity and steadiness. The speaker himself later notes that

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to **repeal**  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not **understood**  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and **good**  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply **feel** (III. 80-3)

Whether or not we recognise it, "codes of fraud and woe" implicitly penetrate the speaker and engulf him, just as they give rule to the transient landscape. This is emphasised by the rhythmic rhyme scheme. The speaker highlights that we do not merely see the codes, but also hear them because they are the "voice" of Mont Blanc and "repeal" all around. The speaker also claims that people such as himself may "not [have] understood" how nature calls to them sublimely, but that they "deeply feel" the message. This implies that it is impossible to reject nature as it penetrates humankind to the core; that we can feel nature's power within us, thus making it a devastating force. The codes of fraud and woe are similar to the "brook trout...[that had] on their backs...vermiculate

patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming” in *The Road*. There is a similitude in the two authors’ description of eternal natural strength and lore: both of them create a sense of timelessness within nature. In light of this, Shelley’s text *Mont Blanc* depicts a side of eternal nature which emphasises the highly sublime mountain that envelops everything in sight into its powerful magnitude.

Nature within *Mont Blanc* is depicted in an incredibly traditional fashion. The Romantics focused heavily on the sublimity of nature, as does Shelley in the poem. Nature seems cold and indifferent at first, yet it is evident that there are different ways to view nature, first as a transient force and later as an all-powerful energy that dictates eternal laws of the landscape. Shelley utilizes the mutability of nature to emphasise the ultimately sublime and enveloping landscape. In doing so, Shelley characterises his speaker as able to understand the temporal nature of life, yet never truly able to connect with the dominating force of eternal laws that batter him.

### **The Speaker: Resistance to Nature’s Power**

The human resistance to nature’s power in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* is much less significant than the resistance in McCarthy’s novel. In *The Road*, the man struggles furiously to create survival structures that allow him to feel as though he has control. However, in *Mont Blanc*, the speaker is a more passive figure. His lessened resistance could originate from many sources, but there are four main reasons that the speaker does not push back against the overwhelming force of nature. First, the speaker is not struggling for his life in a literal sense, as the man in *The Road* had to. At no point within the entire poem is the speaker in any kind of imminent physical danger. Moreover, the speaker is also within his bounds of comfort; that is to say, he is familiar with the territory and landscape of *Mont Blanc* as is indicated by his knowledge regarding the history of the area: “these primeval mountains/ teach the adverting mind. The glaciers creep.../from yon remotest waste”,

causing humankind to flee the slowly encroaching glacier for thousands of years (IV. 100-112). The speaker is also put at ease in that despite the overwhelming surroundings, nature is alive around him. In contrast, within *The Road* nature is literally dead, and the landscape is thus alien to the man. *Mont Blanc* emphasises sublime qualities through a living landscape, as was seen in with the earthquake daemon. Finally, it is important to note that the speaker in *Mont Blanc* evokes the third party, pantheism immediately, as we shall see later; thus throughout the text, the third party intercedes, making the speaker's resistance to nature's overwhelming force unnecessary in many cases.

Nevertheless, there is one brief but clear situation in which the speaker does attempt to relate to nature as an equal, or at the very least to deny its power over him. This moment comes mid-way through the poem, in part III, when the speaker is contemplating Mont Blanc's immensity. The speaker initially highlights the mutability of mankind when he questions, "Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled the veil of life and death." (III.53-4) The "unknown omnipotence" is clearly referencing the eternal laws of the nature that are captured in the physicality of Mont Blanc itself, and the pantheistic spirit that lives within all things. It is these laws that reveal "life and death", or the mutability of mankind. The speaker is effectively being forced to reflect on the veracity of living a mortal life that can only end in death of the larger "omnipotent" mountain. This first statement of mutability is hindered as it is a question – the speaker is unsure as to whether he is actually being forced to feel this or whether he is dreaming: "Or do I lie/ In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep/ Spread far around..."(III. 54-6) At this point, the speaker is denying the great power of the sublime landscape and is effectively shifting the kernel of power to that of the "mightier world of sleep", that is, the dream world. This makes the situation far less overwhelming, for although dreams are indeed mighty (as we saw in chapter two) they are still a product of the human mind and thus are less intimidating in a physical way. This is clearly an attempt by the speaker to wrest power away from the landscape itself and internalise it, making the sublimely charged scenery but a figment of



his minds imaginings. However, by the end of part three, the speaker has encountered nature's "Large codes of fraud and woe", and is unable to deny that which he can "deeply feel" to be true – that nature is truly overwhelming him (III 81-3).

It is clear that the level of resistance to natural forces is especially low in this text and much lower when compared to McCarthy's *The Road*. Unlike in McCarthy's text, in *Mont Blanc* the third party in the triad theory is immediately interwoven into the poem, and there is no steady build up in terms of third party involvement as there is with the boy in *The Road*. However, the difference in resistance to nature is primarily due to the early involvement of pantheism and continued development in the text. Pantheism is immediately working to balance the speaker and nature, and this coupled with the lack of imminent life threatening circumstances leads to a different tone to that in *The Road*. Shelley intertwines pantheism with nature and the speaker, until it becomes the most prevalent element. Separating pantheism from nature and the speaker is a difficult task, but it is one that shall be tackled in order to fully explore how humankind can connect with nature in *Mont Blanc*, and how Shelley's text is epistemologically connected to McCarthy's.

### **Pantheism and Androgyny**

Earlier, pantheism was briefly described for the purposes of exploring the triad; but the importance of pantheism must not be underestimated. In Shelley's text, pantheism plays the most active roles as it binds together humans and nature and actively works to bring about a connection throughout the entire text. Yet the question remains, what *is* pantheism? Pantheism is first and foremost a quite complex philosophy. The Oxford English Dictionary states that the word is formulated through the combination of the Greek particle "pan" meaning "all". The OED also states that theism/theist comes from the Greek "theos" meaning "God", and now is used to mean multiple gods, or spiritual beings. Together the term combines to mean "all is God", yet many now consider the term to mean

“God (or a spirit) in all things.” (Warren 3) This is a very simple way to consider the philosophy of pantheism and is perhaps too anachronistic to be relevant. According to Professor W. Preston Warren of Bucknell University, some regard pantheism “as a variation of atheism.” (3) Writing in 1933, Warren explored pantheistic thought from 1889 to 1917, noting that one condition must be in place for something to be considered pantheistic; that is, the philosophical system of a poem or group of people have to posit the existence of genuine reality outside of a spirit or God. If this is the case, then “all is God”, cannot be so. Thus, the poet or group must consider all of existence to be part of a spirit. Warren goes on to ask whether beings are allowed freedom within the scheme of actuality, or whether God/the spirits “all embracing” nature limits mankind, in either case, pantheism is present. Warren’s view gives a clear outline for pantheistic ideals, albeit in a slightly dated fashion. Philosophically, a modern approach describes the term pantheism quite differently, and it is ironically the more modern, holistic interpretation that sits most comfortably with the Romantics. Michael P. Levine, author of *Pantheism : A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity*, combines Taoist thought with earlier pantheistic methods such as Warren’s, arriving at the conclusion that “pantheism is the view that everything that exists constitutes unity [in some sense]...and that this all inclusive unity is divine [in some sense]... thus, there is no one meaning for all forms of pantheism.” (Levine 25) Levine clearly states (much like Monk regarding sublime theory) that there is no one definition that will fit all pantheistic beliefs. However, this basic concept and definition of “divine unity” shall constitute and underpin our understanding of pantheism as regards to the Romantic concept in Shelley’s poem.

The Romantics adopted pantheism for a variety of reasons, and held an intensely naturalistic view regarding “divine unity”. During the Romantic period, Shelley and other poets had begun to become disillusioned with church practices and beliefs. Indeed, Shelley was himself expelled from Oxford University in the March of 1811 (his first year), after publishing a pamphlet called “The

Necessity of Atheism” and sending copies to all of his Professors and faculty members. However, to believe in pantheism, one must actively also believe in some form of spirit or God. Thus, with regards to these requisites, atheism is not possible. Coleridge, who “at one time was pantheist”, and other poets (including Shelley), soon became enamoured with the idea of a spirit of nature, leaving atheism by the wayside (Levine 5). This can be seen in Coleridge’s *Ode to France* which he begins by explaining his idea of the spirit of nature. Coleridge notes that the clouds, ocean waves and woods area are all “yield[ing] homage only to eternal laws.” (1.4) He saw that the world had “eternal laws” that exist within nature itself, and which make up a “permanent body”, that guides the world, whilst all other things are “transitory parts” and mutable, as Burke states in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Burke 34). Similarly, Shelley believed that nature had profound, natural laws that thrummed quietly and imperceptibly within the mind of all beings, including mankind. This animistic approach to life was incredibly radical for the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and highlighted the Romantic capacity for progressive thought. Pantheism, now understood as a natural spirit of “divine unity”, is incredibly important in regards to the operation of the triad in *Mont Blanc*.

Pantheism is very difficult to separate from nature and the speaker in *Mont Blanc*, but in the following pages I shall attempt to demonstrate how pantheism interweaves with the two, and works towards a reconciliation of humans and nature in an androgynous whole. As mentioned before, the first two lines of *Mont Blanc* introduce pantheism as a central part of the poem: “the everlasting universe of things/ Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves.” (I.1-2) Evident within these lines is Shelley’s clear intent – to permeate the text with pantheism entirely. This is illustrates by his first naturalistic metaphor, which is built upon a pantheistic phrase “the everlasting universe of things”. This phrase exemplifies the central pantheistic belief in which the harmony that lives in all things connects everything in throughout time. The fact that Shelley uses a natural metaphor shows that he is creating a strong alliance between pantheism and nature. The pantheistic spirit is

immediately plunged into a natural setting and is a natural thing in itself because it “rolls its rapid waves” like the ocean. This metaphor is further extended by Shelley as pantheism shifts from blending with nature, to blending with human thought instead; pantheism is “now lending splendour, where from secret springs/ the source of human thought its tribute brings”, which clearly shows an almost imperceptible movement between nature and humankind (I. 4-5). Shelley is actively mixing pantheism with nature, then quickly shifting to mix pantheism with humankind specifically to begin the process of reaching a strong balance between the two. After this balance is reached, the ideal is that the speaker and nature will be able to connect with pantheism within their hearts, not as an outside force and active buffer. At this early point in the text, pantheism is the force that travels between nature and humankind, connecting them subtly and gently.

Pantheistic images saturate the text, and pervasively create interchange between the speaker and the natural world. In part two of *Mont Blanc* the speaker has just been overwhelmed by the “Dizzy Ravine”; yet he feels no need to retaliate or resist being overwhelmed, because pantheism steps in (II.34).

I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencing,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around (II. 35-40)

Nature’s sublime force which induces this “trance”, is diluted as pantheism interweaves and moults the sense of being overwhelmed into one of contented “passivity” as the speaker “renders and receives fast influencing”. Evidently, nature’s power is rendered inoperable, while pantheism creates a connection between itself and the speaker, allowing him to “hold unremitting interchange” with the universe around him. He is given the gift of connecting with the eternal laws of nature briefly so

that its power is immediately a part of all things (including himself). This interchange with all “things around” highlights the pantheistic belief that there is a spirit in all things and that through this spirit, all things are one. With this belief in mind, the speaker is able to feel connected and be a part of nature’s power, rather than be subject to it (like the mountains that bowed to their monarch Mont Blanc).

Shelley drives this connection between the speaker and nature through pantheism further in part II, as the speaker literally describes his “legion of wild thoughts” taking him far into the sublime natural landscape, buoyed up by the pantheistic spirit. At this point the speaker and nature are able to unobtrusively meet with one another as he is held by the pantheistic spirit:

One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings  
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest  
Where that or thou art no unbidden guest (II.41-3)

This section of the poem highlights the speaker’s desire to connect with nature as he hovers over nature’s “darkness”. He signals to nature that it is “no unbidden guest”, meaning that nature is welcome to him; yet the speaker is still separate from nature as he is floating above it, and unable to be amongst the sublime natural landscape directly. Pantheism maintains its buffering effect as the winged speaker wanders above the landscape, separate but longing to connect. Indeed, this section of text also contains one of Shelley’s rhyming couplets (rest and guest), emphasising the eternal laws of nature as the speaker tried to connect. It is evident from Shelley’s early inclusion of pantheism that he is attempting to forge a connection between nature and humankind despite the speaker’s feelings of transience.

Later in the text, Shelley highlights the importance of pantheism in the connection between nature and the speaker. In part three, the speaker examines how the “wilderness” and “man” communicate (III.76, 79). He comments that nature’s voice is “mysterious” and that it

Teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,  
But for such faith, with nature reconciled (III. 77-9)

The “awful doubt” that is mentioned refers to the feeling of being overwhelmed; it refers to a doubt in the speaker’s mind that he can maintain agency and control over himself, and eventually reach a connection with the eternal, sublime centre of nature. On the other hand, Shelley’s use of “faith so mild”, “solemn”, and “serene”, indicates that the speaker is referring to nature’s eternal laws and inherent sublimity. With this interpretation, “faith so mild” refers to a belief in nature’s eternal laws, yet a mild or weak one that leads to alienation from the “solemn” and “serene” landscape which surrounds him. As depicted in the phrase “but for such faith”, Shelley is highlighting that if the speaker were unaffected by such “awful doubt” or mild “faith”, he would in actuality be able to reconcile himself with nature and finally connect. Indeed, Shelley expands this reconciliation to include all “man”, or all of humankind. Pantheism is thus vital to assuage these feelings of doubt and alienation in order to establish a connection between humankind and nature.

In part four of *Mont Blanc*, Shelley begins the process of truly uniting the opposing parties of the speaker and nature and creating an androgynous meeting of the two through pantheism. The personal pronoun “I” has ceased to be used by the speaker as he grows closer to nature, and it does not return. Part four shows the last use of such personal language “this naked countenance of earth,/ On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains/ Teach the adverting mind.” (IV. 98-100) It is evident from this passage that the speaker is “learning” nature’s more “primeval” depths, those of eternal law and immutability. The nature’s “naked countenance” is described by the speaker, who sees its nakedness, a quality usually associated with vulnerability, and moves towards it through the discontinued use of the pronoun “I”, acknowledging that he may be part of something bigger, such as the pantheistic spirit of nature. Later in the fourth part, it seems as though humans and nature are

once again at odds when “The race/ Of man flies far in dread”; yet once again, Shelley defuses the situation by awakening the pantheistic spirit (IV. 17-8):

Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling  
... one majestic River,  
The breath and blood of distant lands...  
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air (IV. 122-6)

Here, pantheism is present within the “river” and “chasms”, which is evident through the phrase “blood of distant lands”. Blood clearly represents the human body; yet, the “distant lands” implies a connection that exists between all things (in a pantheistic unity), as the river connects all of mankind and distant parts of the globe in an almost maternal fashion. The pantheistic spirit is clearly uniting these distant lands, with the “tumult” and sublime nature of Mont Blanc and the river Arve as they billow “vapours to the circling air”. These vapours are the mutable elements to which the speaker relates, and that represent him. Shelley employs the circling motion to remind the reader that in pantheism, all things are one, thus they shall live cyclically as nature does, in an eternal existence. Clearly, nature and the speaker are drawing closer to one another through pantheism, and thus pantheism is gradually becoming absorbed, taking on elements of both the male speaker and feminine nature. As this gradually occurs, the pantheistic spirit grows ever more androgynous. Shelley shows the movement of both parties towards reconciliation as nature literally bears itself, and the speaker acknowledges his oneness with nature: “the naked countenance of earth,/ On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains/teach the averting mind.” (IV. 98) Pantheism then intercedes when nature’s “naked” self becomes too much for the speaker to withstand, reconciling them through the spirit of androgynous pantheism.

Shelley demonstrates a lasting connection between pantheism, the speaker, and nature in part five of the text. Mont Blanc is ultimately unveiled as embodying the eternal law of feminine

nature, as the speaker questions what nature's laws would amount to without the human mind's observance:

...The secret strength of things  
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of Heaven is as a law, Inhabits thee!  
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (139-44)

Large eternal codes of nature are described here as “the secret strength of things which govern thoughts”, emphasising the power that these codes have over the speaker. The term “infinite dome of Heaven is as law” emphasises the idea of pantheism, the spirit that inhabits all things (including heaven), and demonstrates how it “inhabits thee [Mont Blanc]”. That is to say, Mont Blanc and its landscape hold such sublime power, because they are the “secret strength” of *all* things. Yet, the speaker draws nature to him, rather than rejecting its power. He sets himself on a level with Mont Blanc by showing that “earth” and “stars” and “sea” would mean little without the “human mind's imaginings”, as without them, nature's “silence” and moments of sublime quietude would be “vacancy”, and would show dominion over nothing. The speaker has realised that without his reaction to the sublime aesthetic of nature, the landscape holds little power. Because all things are connected through pantheism, they are equal. In many ways their mysterious relationship is identifiable as symbiotic, highlighting the tension between subject and object. Nature and its relationship with human beings in the final lines, clearly displays balance. Pantheism first allowed lines of communication to arise between the speaker and nature through its spirit that inhabits all things; yet here as in *The Road* there is a mysterious but clear shift in Shelley's writing that signals the reaching of balance between nature and humankind. In addition, pantheism is absorbed into the two



parties, becoming part of them and connecting them inherently, thus embodying the ideal of a perfect androgynous union.

Overall, it is clear that pantheism is central to enabling the connection between the speaker and nature. Shelley mobilizes pantheism from the outset as a strong force to ease the tension between the two parties, thus allowing the speaker to feel overwhelmed, yet protected. Thus, unlike the man in *The Road*, the speaker in *Mont Blanc* does not create extensive survival strategies. Rather, for the first three sections of the poem, the speaker allows himself to feel overwhelmed, and leans heavily upon the pantheistic spirit, allowing it to buoy him up. As the fourth section begins, there is a clear shift in relationships, as the speaker begins to alter his language, and the pantheistic spirit heavily tempers nature. There are many connections between *The Road* and *Mont Blanc*, especially in terms of the authors' utilization of sublime imagery and employment of the triad structure to reach a state of union between the speaker/man, and nature.

### **Conclusion: *The Road* and *Mont Blanc***

As this thesis comes to a close, a review of the past few chapters may serve to unite shared threads of thought, and highlight the commonality between Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. At the beginning of this thesis, Foucault and Burke were highlighted for their respective work in epistemic and sublime theory. These two authors served as the foundation form which I based my analysis of the texts. In the heart of the discussion arose the question of how humankind can connect with nature, which is closely connected to epistemic, sublime and androgynous theory. Androgynous theory surfaced when exploring the mechanism by which the author's attempt to unite their male protagonists with the distinctly feminine nature. McCarthy and Shelley both use a triad mechanism in which the male protagonists are able to connect with nature through a third, androgynous party. In the case of McCarthy, the third party was the boy; for Shelley, the third party was the philosophical concept of pantheism. In order to understand how this understanding of the texts is relevant, one must first consider the impact and importance of Foucauldian theory, the use of nature, and the inclusion of the third party. Each of these areas served to impact the audience and readership in a specific way, and open the mind of the reader to self-reflective considerations regarding their own relationship to nature.

In Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, there is a triad formed between the speaker, nature and pantheism, which is at work. The purpose of this triad is to formulate an answer the traditionally Romantic concern of how humankind and nature can connect. In McCarthy's *The Road*, a triad is also formed with the seemingly identical purpose of navigating a relationship between humankind and the landscape; thus, in chapter two (*The Road*), and chapter three (*Mont Blanc*), there are notable similarities between the two texts despite their many differences. Shelley and McCarthy have very clear structures in their respective works, and share many literary concerns.

Foucauldian epistemic theory allows a new understanding of ideas connecting *Mont Blanc* and *The Road*, in which the texts are culturally significant and reflective of environmentalist thought. The interest in humankind connecting with nature is now revealed as a concern in the western world across the centuries. In *The Road*, nature is dead; destruction is all around with fires ravaging the brittle landscape and ash drifting endlessly from the sky. This mysterious depiction serves as a warning to humankind about exhausting earth's resources, and urges the reader to have an appreciation for life in all of its forms. Contrastingly, in *Mont Blanc*, there is a comparable warning stated in a more discreet fashion. Shelly subtly highlights the sublime beauty and grandeur of nature, as well as our ignorance in terms of its eternal laws that shall forever remain mysterious. In this way, Shelley is attempting to re-instill a sense of appreciation and respect for nature that was partially lost in the age of Enlightenment, when people were under the impression that all of nature's mysteries could be solved with science. Shelley and McCarthy both adeptly display their concern for nature in different manners, but to the same effect. Furthermore, Foucault's epistemic theory allows the reader to see these concerns, and apply them to other periods of history; thus, the authors become part of an epistemic continuum, which is focused upon humankind's connection with nature.

Foucault's theory of the episteme serves a strong focal point from which to launch the exploration of the episteme in which *Mont Blanc* and *The Road* were written. However, upon reflection, the texts also buoy up and validate Foucault's theory, as they are strong examples of the episteme at work. The comparison shows three major similarities within the works; first, that they both have a strong concern about connecting with nature; second, that they both utilize sublime aesthetic, and third, that they both utilize a triad structure that implicitly creates a metaphorical androgynous balance between the masculine speaker and feminine nature. The interaction between these three points helps formulate a dialogue regarding the human relationship with nature in both 1816 and 2005. In *Mont Blanc*, a movement towards nature is clear, yet what is also clear is the idea

of becoming one with nature, and being able to live and work in harmony with the great cycles of earth, and nature's eternal laws. This is reflective of Shelley's discomfort with the post-enlightenment world in which science was attempting to explain away the beauties of nature. This is further illustrated in Shelley's use of geology in reference to the earthquake daemon, only to create a sublime and inexplicable metaphor for natural laws; thus, admitting the existence of natural laws, but pointing out the beauty of nature that cannot be explained. This, Shelley does in the framework of his larger concern, to connect with nature as a human being. In 2005 McCarthy tackles a similar dialogue concerning nature, but in a far more overt fashion. In the text, nature is literally dead, reflecting McCarthy's fears for America's natural landscape. Clearly, epistemic theory unveils some major similarities between the two works.

Humankind connects with nature in an individual fashion at the end of *Mont Blanc* and *The Road*, which allows power structures in larger society to be addressed. However, their inclusion of sublime references at this point in time also tells us something important about the authors, their authorial intent and the aim of their work. The endings of *The Road* and *Mont Blanc* are both saturated with sublime imagery. McCarthy and Shelley gather power behind their imagery within the text. The mountain, Mont Blanc, is not simply a mountain covered with flowers, and the desolate post-apocalyptic world is not a welcoming place with new buds ready to bloom beneath the ashes. Indeed in both texts, the authors take advantage of nature stripped bare (a naked mountainside in *Mont Blanc*, a forest of skeletons in *The Road*), to highlight the difficulties of finding a connection between humankind and nature. In addition to this, the sublime exposes external power structures. In overtly overpowering the human figures in the text, the reader too, becomes alienated. This forces the reader to step back and ask the very real question of how one relates to nature as an individual.

Overall, it is clear that Shelley's and McCarthy's texts are undeniably connected through epistemic, sublime and androgynous theory. Each author endeavoured to create a state of union between humankind and nature, and did so through the use of the triad structure in their texts. But the question remains; how should we connect with nature, now that we know it is possible? The answer has changed over time, with McCarthy pausing to consider the larger call for environmental action, and Shelley emphasising the necessity for each individual to connect with nature. Shelley has little to say about negligence or the abuse of the landscape, as in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, such issues were not yet discernible. *Mont Blanc* and *The Road* could be loosely considered bookends to the industrialization of the western world, thus Shelley's relative lack of concern regarding preservation is understandable, as the future in which mountains made way for roads was inconceivable. In contrast, McCarthy has seen the world in which mountain meets road, and crafts his landscape accordingly. However, he does maintain some distinctly romantic elements within his text, showing a clear appreciation for the experience of nature. One moment which exemplifies this comes with McCarthy's description of brook trout with "vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming" (287). He blends the Romantic and sublime beauty of nature, with a modern concern for nature; for "a thing which could not be put back" (287). McCarthy is evidently not looking back or directly referencing Romantic texts; however, he does owe an intellectual debt to the Romantic Movement, which first began the insurrection against overly scientific and modernized thinking in order to protect the dignity and beauty of sublime landscapes. As readers, we should consider these two texts as challenges to readdress our relationship with nature on an individual basis, and assist others in doing the same on a larger scale.

### Works Cited

- Addison, Joseph, Richard Steele, and Donald Frederic Bond. *The Spectator*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965. Print.
- Baccolini, Raffaella, and Tom Moylan. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Baillie, J. *An Essay on the Sublime (1747)*. no 43 Vol. Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1953. Print. Augustan Reprint Society. Publication .
- Burke, Edmund. *Edmund Burke :On Taste, on the Sublime and Beautiful, Reflections on the French Revolution, A Letter to a Noble Lord : With Introduction and Notes*. Regier ed. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1969; 1937. Print. Harvard Classics .
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Druckrey, Timothy, and Erkki Huhtamo. "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd." *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. New York: Aperture, 1996. Print.
- Elvey, Anne F. *An Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke: A Gestational Paradigm*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2005. Print.

Grindley, Carl James. "The Setting of McCarthy's the Road." *Explicator* 67.1 (2008): 11. Print.

The article reviews the book "The Road," by Cormac McCarthy.

Hampsey, John C. "Aestheticizing the Wasteland, Revisioning the Journey: Cormac McCarthy's "the Road."." *Gettysburg Review* 21.3 (2008): 495-9. Print.

Hoeveler, Diane Long. *Romantic Androgyny :The Women within*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005. Print.

Jim Miller. "Obsidian." *Volcano World*. Web. 07 Mar. 2012.

<<http://volcano.oregonstate.edu/education/facts/obsidian.html>>.

Luce, Dianne C. "'they Aint the Thing': Artifact and Hillucinated Recollection in Cormac McCarthy's Early Frame-Works " *Myth, Legend, Dust. Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Rick Wallach. Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. Print.

Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. Routledge, 1993. Print.

Monk, Samuel Holt. *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*. New York: Modern language association of America, 1935. Print. Modern Language Association of America. General Series .

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1963. Print. The Norton Library, N204 .

*Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 11 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.oed.com/>>.

Rambo, Shelly L. "Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" After the End of the World." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.2 (2008): 99-120. Print.

Stevenson, Warren. *Romanticism and the Androgynous Sublime*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996. Print.

Warren, William Preston. *Pantheism in Neo-Hegelian Thought*,. Scottdale, PA: Printed by the Mennonite, 1933. Print.