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Narratives of Ethical Constraint in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction

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Abstract. This article examines how dystopian narratives make restricted moral choices appear necessary and subsequently expose the limits of that necessity. P. D. James's *The Children of Men* provides the central case for a comparison with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Hugh Howey's *Wool*, and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*. Narrative ethics supplies the governing framework, while conceptual metaphor analysis explains how embodied images organize judgments of responsibility, protection, and resistance. The discussion follows decay, containment, burden, and guardianship in James, moral fire in McCarthy, vision and enclosure in Howey, and obscurity, predation, and submersion in Lynch. These patterns acquire changing ethical force through focalization, delayed disclosure, competing voices, and narrative endings. The comparison argues that ethical constraint emerges when a partial representation of danger becomes an apparently sufficient justification for controlling others. It also critiques each novel's distribution of sympathy and authority, including its reliance on privileged observers, exceptional competence, vulnerable children, or familial identification. Metaphorical revision enables ethical questioning, but practical resources determine whether that questioning can alter a character's situation. The novels therefore locate resistance in the difficult

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conjunction of interpretive freedom, material capacity, and accountability to those who receive protection.

Keywords: narrative ethics, conceptual metaphor, ethical constraint, dystopian fiction, comparative literature

1. Introduction

The Children of Men asks what remains of responsibility when people believe that history has no human future. Global infertility produces despair, but it does not dictate the particular institutions through which England manages despair. Xan's government chooses compulsory controls, selective belonging, and abandonment while presenting itself as the custodian of social stability. Theo Faron initially recognizes much of the resulting injustice without accepting a corresponding obligation to oppose it. His eventual commitment changes his conduct, yet the conclusion places him uncomfortably close to the authority he has resisted. James's central ethical problem therefore survives the recovery of reproductive hope: protection can become a justification for domination even when a protector feels love and accepts personal risk (James, 1992).

This article retains James's novel as its principal case and develops three comparisons. *The Road* transfers protective authority to a father travelling with his son after social and environmental devastation. *Wool* places survival within a technologically managed enclosure whose rulers manipulate both information and protective equipment. *Prophet Song* follows a mother whose familiar civic world contracts under emergency powers and political violence. These differences matter. McCarthy's postapocalyptic narrative constitutes a limit case rather than another representation of an intact authoritarian regime. Its inclusion tests whether the ethical mechanisms visible in James persist when institutions collapse. The corpus spans late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century fiction without treating that range as evidence for a universal history of dystopia.

Ethical constraint here denotes a restriction on what characters can imagine as morally permissible or accomplish as a practical action. The distinction prevents an exclusively linguistic explanation of coercion. A character may recognize injustice and still lack food, documents, allies, or a survivable route of escape. Nevertheless, figurative reasoning influences how characters interpret those limits. Decay can make intervention appear futile. Burden can make responsibility seem excessive. Fire can sustain a moral identity while dividing its possessors from outsiders. The article asks how narrative form makes these

inferences persuasive, how later developments challenge them, and whether the telling itself reproduces exclusions that its events invite readers to condemn.

2. Narrative Ethics and the Analysis of Metaphor

Narrative ethics directs attention to moral relations within a story and to the formal decisions through which a story presents those relations. Phelan (2014) distinguishes the ethics of the told from the ethics of the telling, alongside the ethics of production and reception. This distinction prevents a sympathetic protagonist from becoming the automatic measure of a narrative's values. The father's fear in *The Road*, for example, may explain a decision without establishing its justice. Attention to telling asks whose fear receives sustained representation, whose suffering remains peripheral, and what information the narrative supplies when readers must judge. The analysis consequently examines focalization, counter voices, disclosure, and endings as ethically consequential features. Booth (1989) likewise makes the ethical quality of the encounter between fiction and reader central to criticism, rather than reducing evaluation to a work's stated moral lessons.

Conceptual metaphor theory contributes a more specific account of figurative reasoning. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain how people understand one domain through structures associated with another. Imagining responsibility as a physical load makes endurance, distribution, and exhaustion available as ways of reasoning about obligation. Such a mapping highlights certain relationships and leaves others less visible. A burden may require relief, but that inference alone cannot identify who should provide relief or whose interests disappear when a duty is refused. Here narrative ethics supplies the questions of accountability, while metaphor analysis clarifies the language through which characters formulate possible answers. Semino's (2008) discourse approach and Kövecses's (2015) account of context support examining how particular situations alter a metaphor's implications.

Methodological distinctions remain essential. The Pragglejaz Group's (2007, pp. 2–3) identification procedure compares a lexical unit's contextual meaning with a more basic contemporary meaning and asks whether comparison connects them. The present study draws on this distinction in qualitative close reading. It does not claim exhaustive MIP annotation or measured agreement between coders. Literal settings, explicit similes, symbolic objects, and conceptual mappings receive separate treatment. A silo is literally a container. A coronation ring symbolizes authority through convention. Neither automatically constitutes a linguistic metaphor. They become relevant when a narrative connects their

physical properties with judgments about safety, belonging, or legitimate command. Steen et al. (2010) extend linguistic identification through MIPVU, reinforcing the need to distinguish evidence at the level of word use from broader interpretive mappings.

The comparative method follows selected passages from initial conditions through decisive encounters to the endings. It identifies the figurative pattern, attributes it to a speaker or focalized perspective, and examines its consequences and later revision. This approach permits discussion across each narrative without claiming to catalogue every metaphor. It also distinguishes a textual invitation from an empirically established reader response. A passage may encourage sympathy or defer judgment, but different readers can resist that invitation. The interpretive claim concerns how the narrative arranges the opportunity to judge, rather than a prediction that its language produces an identical psychological effect in every audience. Gibbs's (2017) examination of disputes over conceptual metaphor further motivates keeping textual interpretation distinct from claims about experimentally demonstrated cognition.

3. The Children of Men and the Persistence of Guardianship

James locates ethical constraint at the intersection of public administration and private justification. Theo possesses education, relative comfort, and access to his cousin Xan. His withdrawal therefore differs from the powerlessness of people whom the state confines or expels. The alternation between his journal and third-person narration allows his explanations to remain intelligible while events test their adequacy. His cultivated self-awareness does not establish ethical reliability. Indeed, his capacity to describe his limitations can become another way to accommodate them. The narrative asks whether accurate self-description matters when the speaker repeatedly declines the obligations that his knowledge makes visible (James, 1992).

Decay gives this withdrawal an apparently objective foundation. Before the Quietus, Theo observes ruined seaside chalets through a comparison with missing teeth in a deteriorating jaw. The passage connects architectural neglect with bodily ageing. Its immediate achievement is atmospheric, but its position beside an organized death ritual gives the comparison ethical significance. The environment appears to corroborate the exhaustion of the people entering the boats. Yet a deteriorating building cannot establish that an elderly person should die, just as demographic decline cannot authorize compulsory participation. The narrative exposes the illicit inference when Theo encounters the violence beneath

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the ceremony. Human agents enforce what the setting initially makes resemble the natural conclusion of collective decline (James, 1992).

The distinction between condition and decision remains crucial. Infertility belongs to the novel's premise. The withdrawal of protection from selected people belongs to political choice. If the analysis treated every image of deterioration as evidence that moral collapse necessarily follows biological decline, it would reproduce the logic under criticism. James instead permits a discrepancy between the pervasive mood of ending and the specific wrong of an imposed death. The Quietus concentrates that discrepancy in bodies whose vulnerability creates a claim to care. Their approaching deaths do not remove that claim. The narrative's ethical force arises from making an apparently comprehensive explanation encounter someone for whom its consequences are intolerable.

Containment organizes another distribution of responsibility. The Isle of Man penal colony places convicted people beyond the protected mainland, and the Council treats their separation as grounds for denying responsibility for the conditions they endure. Theo disputes that inference. Deportation results from a governmental act, so distance cannot transform its consequences into an entirely private failure among the deported. The Sojourner system reverses the direction of movement while preserving selective obligation. The state admits foreign labour but restricts belonging. In the Council's discussion, invasion imagery recasts migrants as a collective threat, although Theo points to the absence of shortages that might support the stated anxiety (James, 1992).

Neither island geography nor border control automatically demonstrates a lexical metaphor. Their relevance lies in the conceptual movement from physical separation to moral exclusion. The threatened community becomes an inside whose safety supposedly requires reduced concern for an outside. The invasion comparison makes that inference especially visible by transferring expectations of hostile attack onto people seeking admission. Theo's objection challenges both the empirical premise and the resulting entitlement to withhold generosity. This episode also limits an interpretation centred only on his ignorance. He understands the injustice before his later conversion. Ethical constraint operates through selective willingness as well as restricted perception.

The burden pattern makes selective willingness explicit. Considering the Five Fishes' demands, Theo imagines ordinary people as load-bearing animals already carrying sorrow. He then treats heroic virtue as an additional weight that activists have no right to impose. The figurative inference gives refusal a compassionate appearance: exhausted people deserve relief. Its weakness lies in what the calculation excludes. The people suffering under the Quietus, deportation, and

labour restrictions already carry the costs of political accommodation. Protecting the majority from the demands of resistance can mean leaving those costs concentrated on others. Julian's concern for even one mistreated person challenges the scale through which Theo makes intervention appear pointless (James, 1992).

The ending revises this pattern without abolishing it. Theo undertakes demanding care and accepts dangers he previously avoided. After Xan's death, however, he puts on the Coronation Ring and imagines assuming power while reforms wait their turn. The ring functions as a political symbol rather than a conceptual metaphor in itself. Around it, guardianship supplies an inferential framework: the vulnerable require protection, protection requires authority, and the protector must decide how long that authority remains necessary. Julian questions the ring, and Theo briefly resents the challenge. His reaction reveals how readily an obligation to help can become a claim to determine the conditions of help (James, 1992).

James's ending deserves critique as well as recognition for its ambiguity. Julian's pregnancy reopens the future, but the narrative gives substantial attention to what that pregnancy makes possible for Theo's moral development. Her body risks becoming the medium through which a privileged man recovers purpose and political agency. Her objection to the ring resists that reduction, although it does not establish an institutional check on his command. The baptism joins tenderness, religious renewal, and the unsettled transfer of authority within one conclusion. Hope consequently remains double-edged. The novel offers persuasive grounds for renewed responsibility while leaving open whether its emphasis on exceptional birth undervalues obligations to people who cannot promise a future generation. Bray's (2022) Christian reading foregrounds the novel's religious hope. The present interpretation asks how that hope coexists with unresolved political authority.

4. The Road and the Ethical Demands of Moral Fire

The Road tests James's protective reasoning under conditions in which no government can provide ordinary security. The father must repeatedly choose between exposing his son to danger and refusing another person's claim. Material scarcity makes some refusals defensible, and a reading that ignores this pressure would turn ethics into an impossible demand for indiscriminate generosity. Nevertheless, danger cannot settle every decision in advance. McCarthy's recurring image of carrying moral fire gives the father and son an account of survival that exceeds biological continuation. Their task involves preserving a

way of living in relation to others, even when surrounding conditions reward predation (McCarthy, 2006/2022).

The mapping draws on the sustaining and transmissible properties of physical fire. A flame requires tending, provides warmth and light, and can pass between bearers. These properties make moral continuity imaginable as a vulnerable possession that demands active care. The father uses the image to reassure the boy that their suffering serves something worth preserving. Yet the source domain cannot provide an uncomplicated moral guarantee. Fire also consumes, and ash pervades their environment. This contrast does not prove that fire caused the catastrophe, whose origin remains unspecified. It does make the image resistant to a permanently benevolent interpretation. The characters' conduct must determine what their claimed inheritance means.

The boy repeatedly challenges the distance between moral identity and practical behaviour. The episode involving the thief who takes their supplies makes the challenge particularly sharp. The father recovers their property and then forces the thief to surrender his clothing and shoes. In severe cold, the additional deprivation threatens more than discomfort. The boy objects because restitution has become punishment beyond the immediate requirement of protection. His protest distinguishes a justified effort to preserve life from the avoidable exposure of another life. The father eventually returns with the clothes, but the thief has disappeared. The narrative denies the reader a reassuring confirmation that reconsideration has repaired the harm (McCarthy, 2006/2022).

This episode changes the ethical function of the fire metaphor. If membership among morally decent people automatically justified the father's actions, the image would close judgment by turning identity into evidence. The boy instead makes the identity answerable to particular conduct. What a person carries becomes meaningful through what that person owes. After his father's death, he uses the same image to question the stranger who offers him protection. The metaphor thus moves from paternal reassurance towards a criterion that a dependent person can apply to a prospective guardian. Like Julian's challenge to Theo, the boy's question interrupts the assumption that gratitude requires surrendering judgment. Alkaç (2019) similarly identifies the father's and son's differing understandings of their shared moral language, supporting attention to disagreement within apparent ethical continuity.

Narrative proximity complicates this achievement. The father's tenderness, exhaustion, and fear receive sustained attention, whereas strangers often arrive briefly as uncertain presences. This imbalance can make his suspicion feel warranted before the narrative grants an outsider comparable depth. The boy's

objections counter that pressure, but his recurrent position as moral corrective introduces another risk. Treating him as pure innocence would convert a thinking child into an emblem and conceal the difficulty of his judgments. The novel works most powerfully when his objections identify an actionable difference, as in the unnecessary stripping of the thief, rather than when readers imagine that goodness alone can dissolve scarcity.

The concluding recollection of brook trout complicates the child's possible future. Figurative maps and mazes on their bodies evoke an order that human survival cannot recreate. The passage refuses to let the preservation of one child compensate for ecological destruction. Compared with James's birth scene, McCarthy separates moral continuity more sharply from historical restoration. Yet the placement also exposes a formal limitation: nonhuman loss receives concentrated lyrical authority after the main narrative has organized attention around paternal survival. The ending broadens the scale of obligation without showing how the surviving people might meet it. Moral fire persists as a task, not a certificate that the world has recovered (McCarthy, 2006/2022).

5. Wool and the Politics of Seeing Clearly

Wool relocates the relation between care and coercion within an engineered habitat. Its silo preserves human life while concentrating authority over movement, work, knowledge, and punishment. The early narrative follows Holston towards an exterior that residents ordinarily see through sensor-fed screens. His ascent does not produce secure enlightenment. Instead, apparently direct perception becomes the instrument of deception. Howey thereby tests a familiar conceptual association between knowing and seeing. The belief that clearer vision must reveal truth makes a fabricated image persuasive precisely when Holston imagines himself escaping institutional falsehood (Howey, 2012).

Holston's sense that his life, skin, and surrounding walls have become too tight strengthens the relation between embodiment and political constraint. Physical pressure supplies a language for existence that no longer permits tolerable movement. The shift from walls to life makes the mapping more explicit than silo architecture alone could do. His wish to leave follows from this constriction, but the authorities already provide an exit whose apparent freedom they control. The narrative thus questions a simple opposition between imprisonment inside and liberation outside. Movement acquires ethical value through the conditions under which it occurs (Howey, 2012).

The cleaning ritual turns the association between seeing and knowing into a public performance. A person sent outside receives a suit and tools for wiping the

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sensors before dying within the community's view. Cleaning names a literal task, but its administrative use directs attention away from lethal expulsion towards a final contribution to collective life. When Holston sees a flourishing landscape through his helmet display, he assumes that the interior screens conceal the truth. His impulse to clean follows from a desire to help those inside see what he now believes he knows. The authorities exploit his capacity for pity, turning apparent discovery and generosity into participation in a ritual that sustains their power (Howey, 2012).

The deception depends on an important asymmetry. The ordinary exterior view shows genuine devastation, while the cleaner's helmet supplies the false pastoral scene. Holston does not escape official representation by encountering an unmediated reality. He moves between technologies whose purposes he cannot yet distinguish. The delayed exposure of this arrangement places readers under pressure to revise the inference that the vivid image initially supports. Narrative ethics here concerns the timing of knowledge. Howey makes mistaken interpretation understandable before revealing the machinery that produces it, thereby complicating any easy judgment that compliance reflects stupidity or an uncomplicated preference for obedience.

Enclosure supplies a second pattern. Holston experiences his failing suit through the idea of a coffin, making protective equipment resemble a burial container. The comparison exposes a reversal of institutional promise: the apparatus that claims to separate the body from danger helps ensure its destruction. Yet the novel does not establish that every boundary necessarily oppresses. Better materials later permit Juliette's suit to protect her. The relevant ethical distinction concerns who controls construction and whether recipients can test its adequacy. A container becomes protective or lethal through its design, maintenance, and political use, not through a fixed moral property of enclosure (Howey, 2012).

Juliette's survival connects interpretation to collective labour. Her mechanical experience enables suspicion, but other workers' intervention in the suit's materials makes that suspicion practically consequential. Her recognition of visual fabrication would not suffice if the equipment failed on schedule. The narrative therefore revises the promise that emancipation follows automatically from seeing through a lie. Later communication and cooperation further distribute knowledge beyond one individual's perception. In comparison with Theo, Juliette faces a different obstacle: commitment alone cannot cross the boundary, because resistance requires effective technical means. In comparison with Eilish in

Prophet Song, she gains access to resources that can make an escape attempt survivable.

The ending nevertheless leaves grounds for criticism. Juliette's exceptional competence concentrates the restoration of hope around a person who can diagnose failures that others cannot. Such competence deserves recognition, but successful repair cannot by itself establish legitimate government. A community still needs ways to question knowledgeable protectors, inspect their decisions, and survive their errors. *Wool* moves towards renewed possibilities of collective life without fully resolving that problem. Its critique of epistemic monopoly risks ending in renewed trust in a more deserving expert. Read beside James's uncertain guardianship, Howey's narrative raises a shared question: what prevents justified confidence in a rescuer from becoming another exemption from accountability?

6. Prophet Song and the Loss of Ground for Action

Prophet Song presents constraint during its formation. Eilish's family does not begin within an openly separate dystopian world. Political violence enters through recognizable appointments, telephone calls, legal encounters, and domestic obligations. Emergency powers progressively remove the protections through which ordinary people expect to challenge the state. The narrative's closeness to Eilish makes delay intelligible because each decision competes with unfinished duties and incomplete information. Recognizing the trajectory from outside the story is easier than determining the precise moment at which a mother should abandon a missing husband, an ageing parent, a home, and her children's existing lives (Lynch, 2023).

Figurative obscurity first concerns the conditions of knowledge. Eilish's father describes political manipulation through muddy water and imagines reality eventually demanding payment for the falsification. The first mapping represents public understanding as a medium whose transparency institutions can obstruct. The second presents truth as a creditor whose claims cannot remain unpaid. These images illuminate different aspects of authoritarianism, but they also generate incompatible expectations. Deliberate confusion may prevent accountability for a long time, and those who suffer the consequences need not be the people who created them. The novel's progression challenges the comforting implication that reality necessarily restores a just balance (Lynch, 2023).

Submersion intensifies the problem from uncertain knowledge to threatened agency. During her conversation with Michael Given, Eilish imagines family members disappearing beneath water and experiences a corresponding need for air. The passage translates political disappearance into bodily vulnerability.

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People lose the stable support on which ordinary action depends, while the surface separates their distress from effective assistance. Later, communicating Larry's detention to Bailey makes his familiar world seem to give way into an alien sea. The pattern gives civic security an embodied significance without requiring characters to formulate a political theory. Its immediacy comes from the disruption of breath, orientation, and the assumed reliability of a surrounding world (Lynch, 2023).

The same conversation also contains an image of the state as an ogre that enters the home and consumes a father. This explicitly predatory personification reverses the expectation that government protects the household. Unlike an apparently impersonal flood, the consuming creature gives violence appetite and direction. The two figurative patterns therefore should not collapse into a single atmosphere of catastrophe. Submersion emphasizes helplessness and disappearance. Predation emphasizes an active power that takes people. Their interaction allows the narrative to convey overwhelming experience while retaining a vocabulary for the agents and institutions producing it.

Administrative encounters prevent figurative explanation from replacing political causation. The suspension of habeas corpus removes a legal remedy, and threats against those who pursue it convert the demand for protection into further exposure. New passport requirements obstruct departure without needing to announce an absolute prohibition on escape. Eilish may understand the wrong and still find no available procedure that can correct it. Her experience distinguishes *Prophet Song* from *Wool*'s partly reparative plot. Knowledge here often increases as actionable alternatives diminish. It also distinguishes her predicament from Theo's earlier withdrawal. His reluctance operates within relative privilege, whereas her narrowing options increasingly reflect direct coercion (Lynch, 2023).

The final approach to boats gives the water imagery a new material significance. A dangerous crossing now offers a possible route towards life. Water remains threatening, but remaining on land no longer provides the security that the earlier conceptual contrast presupposed. The ending therefore changes the relation between exposure and protection. Its force depends on human decisions that have made the sea appear necessary, including repression, restricted mobility, and exploitation along the escape route. Reading the crossing as a natural culmination of engulfing chaos would erase those decisions. Metaphor conveys the felt crisis most responsibly when the analysis continues to identify who narrows the available alternatives (Lynch, 2023).

Eilish's late reflection on apocalypse also revises the scale of the novel's imagery. She recognizes that a world can end for particular people while ordinary

life continues elsewhere. Catastrophe ceases to mean a synchronized universal event and becomes an unevenly distributed experience. This recognition challenges the earlier impression of total engulfment by placing the family's suffering beside other people's distance from it. It also redirects judgment towards spectators who can treat another community's destruction as passing news. The narrative thereby opens its familial perspective towards an obligation that exceeds identification with this particular household (Lynch, 2023).

Lynch's form also warrants scrutiny. Sustained paragraphs and dialogue without conventional quotation marks intensify continuity between domestic demands and public catastrophe. That pressure can make delayed action comprehensible, although its accumulation risks producing an atmosphere so overwhelming that political violence resembles an irresistible environment. Familial proximity gives suffering specificity while restricting attention to wider forms of collective organization. It can also make recognition depend on identification with a previously secure household. The ethical challenge for readers is to extend concern beyond that familiarity. The narrative's achievement should not imply that displacement becomes morally legible only when those who suffer resemble people whom a protected audience already understands.

Comparative Discussion

Across the four novels, metaphor constrains judgment when a description begins to function as sufficient authorization. Collective decline appears to justify abandonment in James. A threatened moral inheritance can authorize exclusion in McCarthy. Clear sight promises reliable knowledge in Howey. Overwhelming submersion risks making resistance seem inconceivable in Lynch. None of these inferences follows inevitably from its source domain. Narrative progression makes the gap visible by introducing a person, event, or discovery that the existing account cannot adequately accommodate. The contribution of the comparison lies in following this movement from persuasive framing to a test of its consequences.

James remains central because Theo occupies both sides of the problem. He challenges state justifications, reproduces them through private reasoning, and finally acquires the opportunity to exercise similar authority. The other novels clarify distinct elements of this movement. McCarthy demonstrates that sincere love does not guarantee proportionate protection. Howey shows that insight needs material cooperation before it can become effective refusal. Lynch exposes the limits of judging constrained people solely by the clarity or courage of their decisions. Together, these comparisons qualify an overly strong cognitive account. Metaphor shapes the interpretation of possibility, but coercive

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institutions and unequal resources help determine whether a possibility exists in practice.

The metaphors also distribute responsibility through different temporal expectations. Theo's burden reasoning discounts action because the future seems closed. The father's fire preserves a commitment beyond his own lifetime. Howey's disclosure plot promises that revised knowledge can support a different future, although equipment and cooperation must realize that promise. Lynch steadily reduces the interval in which recognition can lead to effective action. These differences matter ethically because postponement has no stable meaning. It can express comfortable avoidance, careful protection, necessary preparation, or the exhaustion of someone confronting incompatible duties. Narrative ethics requires attention to the resources and knowledge available at the moment of choice.

Protection becomes most contestable when a dependent person can answer back. Julian questions the ring. The boy disputes punitive excess. Juliette exposes the failure of officially protective technology, while Eilish insists that the state owes the security it now destroys. These objections do not eliminate dependency. They expose the mistake of converting dependency into unconditional permission. An adequate account of care must therefore include the recipient's capacity to question its terms. The novels differ in how far they can make that capacity effective, but each reveals the ethical weakness of a protector who treats resistance as ingratitude, irrationality, or danger.

The telling itself remains subject to the same scrutiny. James risks making vulnerable people instruments of Theo's renewal. McCarthy grants the father an intimacy that strangers rarely receive. Howey gives exceptional technical competence a disproportionate role in political hope. Lynch concentrates identification within a family whose shrinking world can leave collective alternatives indistinct. These limitations arise partly from the formal choices that make the narratives compelling. Critique should therefore examine the cost of those choices rather than demand an impossible view from everywhere. The pertinent question concerns what readers must supplement, resist, or keep unresolved when a narrative offers an emotionally persuasive centre of judgment.

The endings supply no uniform model of liberation. Birth reopens history without settling government in James. The boy survives without ecological restoration in McCarthy. Technical intervention expands possibilities without completing democratic accountability in Howey. Flight begins without guaranteed refuge in Lynch. Each ending separates the continuation of life from the establishment of justice. This distinction prevents hope from functioning as

retrospective permission for everything undertaken in its name. A metaphor becomes ethically productive when it remains revisable by consequences and by other people's accounts. Its value lies in enabling judgment while leaving the grounds of judgment open to challenge. This inquiry extends Baccolini's (2004) concern with hope in dystopian fiction by asking what continued possibility leaves ethically unsettled.

Conclusion

Reading these four novels through narrative ethics reveals ethical constraint as an interaction between figurative reasoning, narrative authority, and material limitation. *The Children of Men* establishes the central danger: a protector can change while the reasoning that authorizes unrestricted protection persists. *The Road* tests that danger within familial love, *Wool* within technological expertise, and *Prophet Song* within collapsing civic security. Their metaphors carry no fixed ethical verdict. Burden may register suffering or excuse abandonment, fire may sustain obligation or certify exclusion, vision may disclose deception or deepen it, and water may embody lost agency or a hazardous possibility of escape. Narrative form makes these alternatives available through changing perspective, counter voices, and incomplete endings. The resulting ethical demand concerns accountable care: protection must remain answerable to those whose lives it claims to preserve.

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