

ANALYSIS

No Country for Old Men (2005)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

“Women grieve, men fight in this hard-boiled Texas noir crime novel.”

New York Times Book Review
“100 Notable Books of the Year” (for 2005)

“In *No Country for Old Men* Cormac McCarthy remains resolutely on the border, near a Texas town, among drug dealers and the dubious corporate interests that sustain them, amid working-class war veterans struggling daily for survival and the weak forces of law that attempt to stem the slow tide of violence that seems beyond containment.... Sheriff Ed Tom Bell...laments the success of the avaricious world.... *No Country for Old Men* blends the popular American genre of the western and the crime novel, but it is a work of genre fiction nonetheless. In a western, it pits a lone Texas sheriff against a seemingly indomitable ‘black hat’ who is as evasive as he is murderous. In a noir style crime narrative with clear cinematic potential, the sheriff seeks clues and follows their devious pathways through a bleak world of destructive potential he knows well by experience but only thinly comprehends. The novel is a departure from anything McCarthy has written before, with a sentence-level style as spare and laconic as anything published in the contemporary period.

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Walter Kirn ponders this shift in voice in the context of McCarthy’s reputation, writing that ‘the late middle-aged McCarthy found himself so thoroughly trussed in garlands and draped in medals that it’s a wonder he could breathe.’ The author had been so commonly and favorably compared to his most-celebrated forebears in the American tradition that it is perhaps a wonder he didn’t find it difficult to continue, since the pressure to out-write himself must have been tremendous. In Kirn’s terms, since he was ‘designated as Hemingway and Faulkner’s sole legitimate successor, he might have been wise to let his writing hand be removed at the wrist.’

Of course, McCarthy’s prose has often been associated with Faulkner’s density of structure, expression, and word choice, and even in his earlier work, this comparison is more complicated and vexing than it may seem. Both authors share a willingness to employ the language experimentally... But careful stylistic analysis reveals differences as well, particularly in Faulkner’s tendency to employ multiple levels of subordination in stream of consciousness narrative, as compared to McCarthy’s propensity to link independent clauses with the conjunction ‘and,’ thus creating extended lyrical passages with limited subordination. Kirn’s reference to Hemingway is telling and comparatively rare in McCarthy criticism, and this latter stylistic practice is quite reminiscent of the earlier author.

Although some may consider the simplicity in style that characterizes McCarthy’s last two novels as a concession to the mass market, especially since both works were quickly adapted to film, it is perhaps more productive to observe this shift as yet another exploration of the potential of style and language broadly construed. In fact, *The Road* contains explicit allusions to Hemingway, and the sentence structure in both late novels reflects more fully the minimalist aesthetic that Hemingway in part founded, an artistic practice common in modern and contemporary prose fiction, particularly in the short-story form....

The departure in *No Country for Old Men* displays a preoccupation with style itself, in all its variety and diversity, as well as with the fluid possibilities of popular literary genre. Although the story has a pulp quality, in its intensity and latent philosophical preoccupations it remains unbound by formal rules. Still, as Kirn notes, it is ‘a darting movie-ready narrative that rips along like hell on wheels because it has no desire to break new ground, only to burn rubber on hard-packed old ground, thereby packing it down harder.’ Kirn’s rhetorical flourish illuminates the role of genre in the novel, since both the western and the crime novel take violence as their primary subject but deal with them with varying levels of intensity. In *No*

Country for Old Men, McCarthy twists these pulp genres, and in doing so frustrates readers of popular novels who come to the narrative with fixed expectations as to the nature of character and the outcome of plot....

The novel began as a screenplay, which makes sense considering that Sheriff Bell's interior monologues are written such that they might be easily excised in voice over, and the main narrative is simple, vivid, and weighted heavily in the direction of dialogue. Though it is McCarthy's first work after the Border Trilogy, it is the fifth set in the West, and it involves a further exploration of the nature and reach of human violence, as well as the capacity of individuals to control the changing circumstances that contain and propel them. The film rights to *No Country for Old Men* were quickly optioned by Paramount and the film was released in 2007...winning four Academy Awards including Best Picture....

The novel is set in 1982 in and around the small south Texas town of Sanderson, near the Mexico border. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, a World War II veteran and a descendant of a long line of Texas lawmen, struggles to maintain the peace amid the escalating violence of the drug trade. In his early career, he met little conflict, sending only one criminal to death row. But the malevolence he has encountered is perplexing to him, and he struggles to understand the motives that drive people to acts of brutality and at least initially concludes that the world is getting worse, that his efforts are ineffective in responding to the harsh realities of human avarice in the late twentieth century. Though critical of himself, he takes solace in his marriage, crediting his wife with grounding him and giving his life a sense of meaning and value, saying that 'marryin her makes up for ever dumb thing I ever done.'

The main narrative begins as a local welder and Vietnam veteran, Llewellyn Moss, while hunting antelope near the Rio Grande, finds the vehicles and bodies of a group of drug runners who have killed one another in an exchange gone wrong. In a moment of temptation and weakness, Moss unwisely leaves with a satchel containing two million dollars. The satchel hides a radio transponder, and he finds himself fleeing from a number of people who seek the money—most important, the single-minded psychopath Anton Chigurh, who murders without remorse in accord with an inexplicable set of principles grounded in a vaguely articulated deterministic philosophy. Chigurh contends that his free choice to kill is mitigated by an elaborate system of cause and effect that renders individual agency largely inconsequential. Moss sends his young wife, Carla Jean, to her grandmother's home in Odessa, and the novel involves the process by which Chigurh seeks Moss, and Ed Tom Bell desperately tries to stem the violent outcome and return Moss to his wife. In the end, however, Moss and Carla Jean are killed, Chigurh (a kind of 'ghost') finally disappears, and Bell, having retired, is left to contemplate the nature of violence, his own purpose and value, and the moral and religious implications of the life he has lived and the world he has seen.

For all its assent to the popular, the novel takes its title from William Butler Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium,' among the most widely anthologized poems of twentieth-century literature. The lyric begins 'That is no country for old men,' referring to an artless world of impermanence and sensual pleasure, which contrasts with the timeless world of beauty, evident in great works of art, specifically those of the post-Roman Byzantine Empire. The reference is clearly to Ed Tom Bell, his uncle Ellis (a former sheriff who enters briefly late in the story), as well as the harsh world of violence and struggle they work to control and understand. The novel presents fewer intellectual challenges since its style is direct, with virtually no archaic vocabulary and few syntactic complexities. The sentences are reminiscent of Hemingway's, as are the characters, and Hemingway's influence on the novel is reinforced by McCarthy's deliberate allusions to his predecessor's works in *The Road*.

The narrative involves two interlaced strands that are clearly distinguishable, the first being Ed Tom Bell's extended interior monologue, printed in italics, and the second the main storyline, which involves Llewellyn Moss, Carla Jean Moss, Anton Chigurh, and Ed Tom Bell. The monologue takes the story as subtext but does not substantially refer to events that occur in the primary narrative, and the sheriff's reflections shift between intense inquiries into the nature and reach of violence and more casual but nonetheless touching comments about his wife and the sustaining value of their marriage. The main narrative is driven by scenes and dialogue and as such is quickly paced. Both strands encourage a blend of objective and subjective modes of perception, as the tangible events in the material world stand together with a detailed, plaintive, and occasionally heart-rending consideration of its meaning.

As he attempts to sort out the events he has witnessed and the life he has lived, Ed Tom Bell feels overmatched, unable to contend with forms of violence that seem monstrous in proportion to those other sheriffs have dealt with in the past. He loves to hear stories of the old-time lawmen—the ethical standards that defined their behavior, the stoic resolve with which they confronted a harsh world. But initially he contends that their circumstances were less formidable, as he recalls one ancestor who worked as a sheriff but didn't even carry a gun. He imagines a past defined by virtue and social order, an ethos of personal responsibility reflected in manners and pristine codes of external behavior. As he ponders the decay of that world, he is concerned not so much about personal safety but about the outcome of his overexposure to evil.... The world is rife with a violence that he is drawn to contemplate and understand, as he reads the papers and ponders incidents of murder and psychopathology. In doing this he reflects upon the wisdom of his wife, Loretta, who has made a deliberate decision to limit her exposure. Even as he performs his duties and explores these questions, he acknowledges her wisdom, saying, *'My wife wont read the papers no more. She's probably right. She generally is.'*

But the extraordinary nature of the modern moment compels him, as he remembers the one young man he sent to execution, who murdered without motive, purpose, logic, or regret. This becomes clear in a chilling confession as Bell recounts it: *'I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville.... My arrest and my testimony... He'd killed a fourteen year old girl.... And he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said if they turned him out he'd do it again.'* The boy's malevolence is chilling and is configured more fully in Anton Chigurh as the novel proceeds. But Ed Tom Bell is unable to separate his direct experience of evil from his memories of the past, and his reflections are notably reactionary, since he thinks the brutality of the modern moment is more forceful and prevalent than in previous generations. The boy's lack of motive and the sense of mystery that surrounds him suggest a form of evil that transcends time and place, and in experiencing its stunning frankness as the boy expresses it, Bell misapprehends its nature, associating it with a twentieth-century environment characterized by the drug trade. Later Chigurh's actions serve to further define in words the brutality the boy thinly exemplifies, and in the philosophical musings that often precede his murders, Chigurh becomes an omnipresent force of evil that is metaphysical by implication....

McCarthy's own assessment of human brutality in the Woodward interview... *'There's no such thing as life without bloodshed.... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way...is a really dangerous idea.'* Bell's initial view of his current situation stands in contrast to the notion that the world has always been defined in part by bloody competition and violence, but it captures a sense of moral urgency and a desire for peace not apparent in McCarthy in the interview. Though it is inappropriate to conflate McCarthy with one of his characters, it seems reasonable to assume that, for all his fatalism, the author by no means accepts the bloodshed he often portrays. The monologue deals with the intricacies and personal tensions of a man attempting to understand the power of violence in a changing world, and it does so in a deliberate homage to the hard-boiled novels of the noir genre, particularly in the hands of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Jonathan Latimer, and Earle Stanley Gardner, in which the detective ponders in first-person narrative the darkening world that confines him and dictates the ethical terms of his actions.

Though Llewellyn Moss is an important character in the main narrative, a protagonist in the sense that readers are encouraged to sympathize with his plight, the story centers on the character of Anton Chigurh. The peculiar, measured, and philosophically portentous logic that attends his actions is rich with implications, insofar as it sheds light on the questions Ed Tom Bell struggles to answer. Throughout the novel, McCarthy lends this villain's character a mythic and otherworldly quality, not unlike his many other avatars of evil—the triune in *Outer Dark*, Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, even Eduardo in *Cities of the Plain*. From the onset, to the reader familiar with McCarthy it seems unlikely he will ever be captured or his malevolence contained.

Carson Wells, the former lieutenant colonel who is hired to kill him, describes him as a 'psychopath,' and this term is by no means inappropriate. But he is also 'sociopathic' insofar as he lives a life unencumbered by social obligation or responsibility to any preconceived moral precepts. His worldview is well considered and philosophically constituted, which becomes clear when he finds Carson Wells.... The killer's presumed insanity is the natural outcome of a deterministic philosophy prefigured in the dialogue

between John Grady Cole and Duena Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*, when they ponder the role of fate, chance, and choice through the metaphor of the coin toss. The same chaos theory that formed the intellectual basis for that conversation motivates the thoughts and actions of Anton Chigurh.

It is essential to begin any inquiry into Chigurh's character by piecing together elements of his perspective on the God question. Late in the novel as he is about to offer the coin toss to Carla Jean Moss, he alludes to his lack of religiosity indirectly, saying, 'Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact.' The God he imagines is by no means a deity of benevolence and concern but is instead an abstract and indifferent lawgiver concerned with balancing the cosmic scales in the interest of principles beyond human understanding. The essential point, however, is that Chigurh characterizes himself as a nonbeliever, and the fact that he models himself upon God is perhaps best taken as a playful attack on the deity his victim takes as real. As with the garage attendant earlier in the novel, he offers Carla Jean an opportunity for salvation. He asks her to call the toss in the hope of saving her life. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the coiner casts the alternate sides of the coin and sets the course of human fate in motion. The coin now rests in Chigurh's hands....

The fact that Chigurh could act out of free will, choosing not to kill, is from his point of view a comforting illusion devoid of truth. Though he freely told Llewellyn his life was forfeit, he offered him the opportunity to save Carla Jean by returning the money. Not trusting him, Moss refused to do so. That decision was one of many events that led to the here and now, and in the strange logic of Chigurh's determinism, he presents the coin toss as the one chance to chart the sequence differently and preserve her life. From his perspective, he is merely an actor in a rigidly determined historical process. She initially refuses to call the coin, claiming that God himself would not sanction the act, but Chigurh responds that the God she believes in would certainly want her to try. In the end, she assents and loses....

Chigurh begins by defining his role in the events that will lead to her murder. He acknowledges the reality of volition, but the choice was Carla Jean's as well. Though her decision to marry Llewellyn Moss seemed inconsequential at the time, the outcome of that choice is cataclysmic in its consequences and entirely unpredictable. It is again the central metaphor of chaos theory—the butterfly flapping its wings in New York causing a typhoon in the South Seas.... The course of history and human lives proceed independent of free will, and prediction is impossible in the closed and highly complex physical system that is the world. Certainly, Chigurh might 'choose' not to kill Carla Jean. He might 'choose' a life of benevolence and decency. But from his point of view the world would not change as a result: its violence and indifference to human life are pervasive, and the cause and effect that constitute the universe are entirely determined and rife with suffering and bloodshed. Like the pronouncements of Judge Holden and Eduardo, Chigurh's thinking is bound within his character and should be taken as only one thread in the thematic texture of the novel. His logic, particularly in its anti-religious implications, stands in contrast to the motives, hopes, and dreams of Ed Tom Bell....

He associates...luck with divine providence, saying, '*I don't recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.*' This rather conventional assent to God is complicated toward the end of the novel by his lengthy conversation with Uncle Ellis as well as his portentous dream of his father. After deciding to retire, he visits Ellis at his dilapidated home. The old man is confined to a wheelchair as a result of a gunshot he took in the line of duty as a sheriff.... As they ponder the brutality they have seen, Ellis accepts the existence of God but questions His ability to control the universe He has presumably set in motion. From Ellis's point of view, Ed Tom Bell is wrong in considering the world more cruel now than in the past. Evil is an ever-present reality standing in perpetual conflict with the decency that maybe found in human relationships.

This insight conditions the content of Bell's evocative dream at the end of the novel, in which he sees his father carrying a gourd of fire into a pervasive darkness. In the dream he ponders the meaning of the fire, and this final segment in Ed Tom's reflection functions much like the epilogues in *Blood Meridian* and *Cities of the Plain*. In the epilogue of the former novel, a mysterious man strikes holes in the floor of the desert, releasing a fire that suggests the principle of divine order that underlies all that can be seen as real. The fire in Bell's dream takes on a more personal quality, and meaning is associated with human intimacy even in darkness... The fire suggests warmth, hope, survival, illumination in the darkness of cosmological

oblivion, and—given his discussion with Uncle Ellis—the divine. While it may merely reflect Bell’s desperate hope amid the hard reality of the world, it emerges from his memory of fatherhood and it tallies with his deeply fulfilling experience of marriage. The novel, then, for all its evocation of malevolence and brutish reality, concludes on an intimation of possibility and light, linked vaguely to the divine, perhaps, but firmly to the redemptive power that grows from the bonds of human community.”

Steven Frye
Understanding Cormac McCarthy
(U South Carolina 2009) 152-64

“In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy twice portrays versions of this coin parable. Chigurh uses a coin toss to determine whether someone lives or dies. In the first instance, the person wants to know what is being bet before he calls the coin. Without knowing what is at stake, he reasons, he cannot call the coin. Chigurh replies that one’s life is at stake with every choice being made and the coin toss is merely an expression of that unchangeable fact. Chigurh refuses to call the coin for the man because he insists that, regardless of what happens, the man’s fate is his to make. The question that this episode raises is to what extent either of the players is responsible for what happens. Since the man called the coin correctly, Chigurh did not need to act and we cannot know what was truly put to the test.

At the end of the novel Chigurh gives Moss’s wife the same choice. At first she refuses. She insists that whether Chigurh kills her or not is a choice that Chigurh is making, not how she calls the coin. She accuses Chigurh of pretending to be God. Chigurh, however, suggests there is a context broader than the immediate one that seems to be determining her fate. ‘There is a reason for everything,’ he says. His point is that both of them exist in a complex chain of cause and effect that has brought each of them to this moment. As he told the gas station attendant, the coin being flipped left the coinmaker’s hand in 1958 and traveled twenty-two years through countless exchanges, independent of Chigurh, before arriving with Chigurh to enact this moment. The same is true of Carla and Chigurh themselves. Most of the time we do not know the effects of our actions—even when we think we do, we do not.

In this instance, Carla knows exactly what the consequences of one of her acts will be. To call the coin and decide her fate is terrifying. She wants to believe that God will decide her fate, not Chigurh, but his argument is that her fate is always being decided and this is but another instance of that inevitable process. ‘Anything can be an instrument,’ as he elsewhere remarks, and one day ‘there is an accounting.’ In Carla’s case, Chigurh is the instrument of another’s fate who happens to be present at her final accounting. Chigurh tells Carla what Alfonsa told Cole: there is no might have been and there never was. Thus, when Carla calls heads and the coin comes up tails, Chigurh suggests that it is for the best. To ask him to contradict the coin toss is to ask him to ‘second say’ the world, which is futile.

Carla’s last act before being killed is to say that she understands Chigurh’s point. One can dismiss Chigurh’s actions as those of a homicidal maniac but that does not deny the possibility that in her last moments Carla has accepted her destiny as the only possible one allowed her. She had believed that Moss was fated to be her husband so it is logical that she should believe that Chigurh is her only possible end. From this perspective, her death is not only necessary but also the means by which she understands the collective meaning of her life’s innumerable choices.... In her last moments, Carla’s blindness falls away as she awakens into death.”

Timothy Parrish
“History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy’s Western Novels”
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy, ed. Steven Frye
(Cambridge U 2013) 73-74

“I must confess that in one reading, this novel simply seemed a failure, a tossed-off screenplay barely redacted into a novel in a genre that does not hold much interest for me. It seemed even to fail at that, as if the author’s heart was not secure in the pot he might have meant to boil. *No Country for Old Men* starts hot, but then cools, and finally mists over.... This is one of those works whose apparent failures create unexpected difficulties which can only resolve in rereading, where the novel then resonates in quiet success.... Neither is it a ‘hard-boiled Texas noir crime novel’ at all. It merely starts out that way. It ends up as a coda to *All the Pretty Horses*. And in that way, *No Country for Old Men* not only extends but also

begins to resolve the son and father anxiety found in McCarthy, even if doing so means a step backward into a nostalgic evocation of mythic archetype....

The apparent protagonist is killed three quarters of the way through the novel. The true protagonist grumbles along in monologues that begin each chapter. For all his West Texas stoicism, these soliloquies begin to run on.... Anton Chigurh's visual possibilities as a striking movie villain fit perfectly his primary role in this novel's opening. He is himself a fetish of a villain, boiled down to a few villainish characteristics... By killing people with a cattle gun, Chigurh is turning them into livestock, denying their humanity. Moreover, by shooting them in the forehead while imprinting in them a symbolic third eye—a visual representation of the enlightenment of matters of chance and destiny that he sometimes provides in a brief pre-murder Socratic dialogue.... Anton Chigurh is a villain of our time.... The phallic thrust of the cattle gun is so obvious as to deserve no further comment....

For Bell, drugs merely represent a larger post-sixties slide in American moral values.... Drugs are the substitute for God, then, in the fallen world according to Bell.... Bell's only hope, as God's in the book of Jeremiah, is that his children will again recognize righteousness, show respect for his authority, and refuse to take up the evil customs (drugs, another religion) from outside the place of safety within the larger wilderness.... And whatever the author's politics, Bell eventually voices the fearful feelings and positions of many Americans.... Things missing, that he somehow assumes were always there before, worry him: a lack of manners, a lack of discipline in schools, a lack of religion.”

Jay Ellis

“Fetish and Collapse in *No Country for Old Men*”

No Place for Home:

Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

(Taylor & Francis 2006) 225-61

Michael Hollister (2014)

No Country for Old Men is a 2007 neo-noir Western thriller film based on the 2005 novel of the same name by Cormac McCarthy, and written and directed by the Coen brothers, and starring Tommy Lee Jones, Javier Bardem and Josh Brolin. The film follows a welder who finds a case full of money at the site of a botched drug deal, who is then pursued by a psychopathic hitman.