

Rhetorical Analysis: *No Country for Old Men*

The film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* tells a story of the effect wealth has on one's wellbeing. Act one of the film has the secondary protagonist, Llewelyn Moss, stumbling upon the violent remnants of a drug deal gone wrong in the west Texas plains. As he investigates, he finds a briefcase filled with \$2 million dollars, the clear cause of the violence, and decides to take it. In taking this money he becomes the target of both Anton Chigurh, a ruthless hitman and symbolic unstoppable force, and the Mexican drug cartel from whom he stole. Throughout the film the primary protagonist, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, tries to make sense of the nihilistic carnage and find Moss before Chigurh or the Cartel kill him. This opening serves a dual purpose of being an engaging hook as well as a visual testament to the destructive power greed can have on wellbeing and happiness. These first scenes make it clear that while the intended audience is broad, it is exclusive of the very wealthy. In the 2007 film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, Joel and Ethan Coen portray the destruction of a man's life after coming into a large sum of drug money, subtly commenting on the corrosive power of greed and the perceived synonymy of wealth and happiness by leveraging their reputation and esteemed source material (*ethos*), appealing to the experience of the Everyman (*pathos*), and use of a clear narrative structure that stresses cause and effect (*logos*).

By the time *No Country for Old Men* released in theaters the Coen's had established their *ethos* as esteemed filmmakers. Over the past 40 years their films have been nominated for 322 awards, having won 144 (Joel Coen Awards). Additionally, they borrow the authority of the

original author, Cormac McCarthy, whose novels have won a total of 16 awards since 1959 (Awards won by Cormac McCarthy). The effect these collective accolades have on the material is in collecting an audience that is already open to the argument that will be made in the film and uniting fans of both the author and filmmakers. In taking on this story, the authority of all three is leveraged for the film and the audience is conditioned to believe the world of *No Country for Old Men* before the film even begins.

By focusing on the experience of the Everyman in Llewelyn Moss and primary protagonist, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, *No Country for Old Men* skillfully wields *pathos* to bring the audience into its world, grounding them in a familiar reality before unceremoniously shattering that sense of familiarity with careless violence. While there may be those in the audience that do not relate directly to the blue-collar life of Moss or to the rural sheriff Bell, their lifestyle is one that is rooted in the popular American consciousness. In presenting these characters as the Everyman the film plants the idea that the events of *No Country for Old Men* could happen to anyone. Despite having seen the violent consequences, Moss takes the briefcase to better his life and makes a choice that is utterly human, believing that those consequences won't apply to him. In this way the apathy and ruthlessness of the main antagonist, a psychopathic hitman named Anton Chigurh, serves as a stark contrast to the Everyman, fostering a sense of imminence and tension that continues throughout the film. Both the film and the novel open with the brutal killing of a police officer by Chigurh, establishing the ease at which the character is willing to take a life regardless of station. In showing this before establishing the role of the Everyman, the audience is aware of the consequences of being pursued by this man. While anyone in the audience can imagine themselves in Moss's place, the brutality exhibited by Chigurh is almost unthinkable. Though Moss is pursued continuously throughout the film he never once considers

leaving the briefcase despite an ever-increasing severity of circumstance. His intentions are made clear toward the end of Act one when he tells his wife, “[you don’t work at Walmart] any more, Carla Jean, you are retired” (35:00). This comes on the heels of a scene in which the reality of his situation has set in and, though he and his wife are in danger, he keeps the briefcase, believing the money inside to be the key to his happiness. In this way the film reinforces the idea that the consequences of greed are both severe and inevitable.

The film frequently switches perspectives between Moss, Bell, and Chigurh in a way that sets up clear cause and effect, establishing *logos*. Throughout the film the audience witnesses Moss flee from Chigurh, Chigurh piece together clues to find Moss, and Sheriff Bell investigate the aftermath as he tries to make sense of it all. In presenting the events in this way, the audience believes each step of the chase that follows the acquisition of the briefcase. Reinforcing this idea, Moss asks his wife, “at what point would you quit bothering to look for your \$2 million” (*No Country for Old Men* 26:00), cleaning buckshot from his shoulder as he does so. At this point in the film, it becomes clear to Moss that both he and his wife are in imminent danger. While the violence in the film is increasingly graphic, and at times gratuitous, the reality that has been set for this story makes it more than simply believable; it is expected.

Throughout the film, the argument the storytellers make is that sudden wealth and greed have negative consequences. The *ethos* of the Coens and McCarthy draw the audience in and predisposes them to be receptive to the argument made in *No Country for Old Men*. In appealing to the experience of the Everyman with Moss and Sheriff Bell, both the author and filmmakers create a recognizable lifestyle that quickly falls apart at the hands of Moss’s greed. By showing the events in a chronological order, clear cause and effect is established and the audience believes each successive act of violence. Both the source material and the filmmakers succeed in

their argument by presenting it as thematic within a fictional story. The fact that the fiction is presented in a film goes a long way toward bolstering the *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* of the story. By its nature, fiction attracts an audience that is willing to extend disbelief to some extent and this audience is broadened when the concepts are shown in a film.

Works Cited

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