**­­Introduction**

*American Sniper* and *No Country for Old Men* were nominated for Best Picture by the Academy Awards during their respective release years, and for good reason. With breathtaking cinematography and real-life events to draw from, *American Sniper* told the story of Chris Kyle, an American hero who fought to protect his nation from the forces of evil. *No Country for Old Men* took Cormac McCarthy’s fictional novel and instead, masterfully illustrated the futility of man in the face of evil. While *American Sniper* works to maintain the Western hegemony, *No Country for Old Men* works to disassemble it. These films use similar directorial techniques but conflicting overarching messages to illustrate imperialism in wildly different ways. While *American Sniper* justifies cultural imperialism through the actions of Chris Kyle, *No Country for Old Men* instead uses the character of Anton Chigurh to illustrate its destructive nature.

***American Sniper***

Clint Eastwood follows the traditional hegemony closely in the character development of Chris Kyle early on in the film. Kyle is a white, heterosexual, Christian male with superior physical traits, unparalleled courage, and a noble cause to protect those who cannot defend themselves. Taking into consideration the film’s portrayal of Iraqis as evil savages, Kyle’s story strongly resembles a combination of the classical and American monomyth*.* After undergoing rigorous training to become a Navy SEAL, which falls in line with the classical monomyth, Kyle takes his natural talent with a rifle overseas for four tours in Iraq. On the fourth tour, Kyle conquers the infamous Mustafa and earns himself the title of the most lethal sniper in American history. On closer inspection of Kyle’s motives and what he fights for, the American monomyth emerges. In Lawrence and Jewett’s definition of the American monomyth, “a community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil” (Cite later, does not count towards 4 sources). America is the Eden that is being threatened by the evil Iraqi forces, but this is an ideological threat rather than a geographical one. Historically, America has been known to take up arms to not only protect, but spread their own ideologies. Such examples include the Vietnam War and the Cold War, events which Professor Robert J. McMahon states can be interpreted as the U.S. being “concerned primarily with its own economic expansion, and reflexively opposed to communism, indigenous revolution, or any other challenge to its authority ([Cite source](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/interpretations.htm)).” By following the traditional hegemony, Eastwood enables Kyle to take on the role of the protector of the Eden, which in this case are American ideologies.

In the beginning of the film, flashbacks are used extensively to develop Kyle’s hegemonic traits. A family scene from Kyle’s childhood demonstrates the patriarchal household that he was raised in and the influence of Christianity on his upbringing. Kyle’s father teaches him from a young age to be a sheepdog, protecting the weak sheep from the sinister wolf. Present day Chris Kyle then emerges from a barn donning a white Cowboy hat, an extreme close-up shot demonstrating that he is the hegemonic white hero, or sheepdog, around which the film will revolve. This can be seen as a call-back to early Westerns in which a cowboy protagonist must save an Eden from malicious forces. The film uses high-key lighting and low-angle shots repeatedly to emphasize Kyle as the good-natured hero. The introduction of Taya as the helpless female that Kyle saves further indicate the patriarchal nature of the film and, again, the heroic stature of Kyle. The film uses all of these tactics to ensure that Kyle is the perfect poster boy to represent the U.S. military and justify their imperialistic actions throughout the film.

Historically, America has demonstrated a self-righteous tendency to determine the extent of the freedom that other countries can have. A number of films have been produced revolving around American exceptionalism, and *American Sniper* is no different. While the Middle East is depicted as a war-torn wasteland, America is a thriving Eden in which children can happily enjoy birthday parties and citizens look out for each other. In the early 2000’s, the Bush administration implemented a National Security Strategy that justified invading nations to prevent them from threatening the U.S. (Citation – Saved on flashdrive). *American Sniper* follows Chris Kyle during the Iraq War and the search for WMDs, depicting the Iraqis as immoral savages along the way. The film goes as far as to even strip Iraqi women and children of their innocence, as Kyle’s first two kills are of a young boy and his mother who were primed to launch a grenade at U.S. troops invading their homeland. Despite the convoy of U.S. soldiers and tanks bearing down on a woman and child who are having their own land invaded, it is the Iraqis who are at fault and being shown as the aggressor. The lack of redeeming qualities in Iraqi characters is noticeable throughout the movie, and is exemplified by the use of low-key lighting and absence of character development. The absence of character development of the Iraqis serves to disconnect the audience from them, further alienating the group and defining them as the antagonists. The demonization of the Iraqis is particularly important as it is meant to justify all of the actions committed by the U.S. military. This justification is seen as well through the contrastingly heroic representation of American soldiers as the film progresses. Kyle first realizes his desire to serve and protect when he witnesses the 1998 attacking of the U.S. embassies on his television, which implies that he is acting out of self-defense for his country. The character development of Kyle’s fellow soldiers, such as Biggles’ search for an engagement ring, allows for their deaths to be all the more jarring – and thus further rationalizes that what America is doing is right. Kyle also demonstrates great humility, refusing to acknowledge the success of his tours and instead fixating on his failure to save more men. This shows that he is not proud of the killing, but sees it as a necessity to prevent his own friends from being killed. This film uses a conservative approach of maintaining the Western hegemony in order to defend the decisions of the United States in spreading their influence overseas.

***No Country for Old Men***

While *American Sniper* demonstrates unwavering patriotism, *No Country for Old Men* illustrates imperialism in a far more critical light by mirroring it through the actions of the antagonist, Anton Chigurh. Like Chris Kyle, Chigurh is a male in a noticeably patriarchal society. The film uses similar directorial techniques such as extreme close-ups and low-angle shots, but instead of defining him as a heroic figure, these techniques serve to pronounce Chigurh’s formidability. Chigurh is often dressed in dark clothing and cast in shadows, creating a mysterious and ominous aura about him. His methods are excessively brutal and throughout the movie he takes on the role of adjudicator. Chigurh’s actions and behavior in this film can be compared to those of imperialistic nations throughout history and present day.

Imperialism is often motivated by the desire to obtain something that another person has. The entire plot in this film is driven by the hunt for money - $2 million that was found by the secondary protagonist, Llewelyn Moss. Moss understands that by taking the money, he is placing himself in grave danger, but his greed gets the better of him. He is willing to fight Chigurh in order to keep this money that he has no claim over. But the greed for money goes beyond the $2 million that the film revolves around. When Moss is bloody and hiking across the Mexican border, he stumbles into a trio of college-aged men. Moss pays one of the men $500 for his jacket, but when he asks another for his beer, the man sees the opportunity to earn money himself and asks how much Moss is willing to give him for it. This greed even extends to young children, as seen at the end of the film. After Chigurh is blindsided by a reckless driver, he offers $100 to a young boy for his shirt. After Chigurh limps off into the distance, the young boy’s friend can be heard staking a claim in the money thus resulting in an argument. Regardless of age or situation, money is at the centerfold of our society.

Along with these examples is also Chigurh’s use of the coin. Oftentimes, Chigurh places the fate of other people’s lives in his own hands. To those who he does not kill outright, he allows them to bet their life on a coin flip. In one particular scene, Chigurh is at a gas station with a conversational storeowner. Chigurh is startled to hear that the storeowner married into ownership of the gas station and decides to place his life on a coin flip. In a sense, this is representative of imperialism in that a country can have ownership of land or natural goods and another country decides that they are undeserving of it. The confused storeowner repeatedly asks what the problem is and what the coin flip is for, but Chigurh simply tells him that he must call it. Chigurh even says that “I can’t call it for you or it wouldn’t be fair,” as if the situation was fair to begin with. This implies that the responsibility and outcome of the coin toss is on the storeowner and not on Chigurh for placing the man’s life on the fate of the coin in the first place. This is the justification often seen by imperialistic nations who blame other nations for making wrong decisions, such as what social or economic system is adopted. The use of the coin in making these decisions serves as a repeated reminder that the driving force behind imperialism is greed.

Chigurh exudes a self-righteous nature that is comparable to imperialistic nations. He has his own set of morals and beliefs that he imposes on other individuals, most of whom are seemingly innocent. He takes it upon himself to determine whether an individual deserves to live, and leaves a path of destruction in his wake. This is wholly similar to the effects of imperialism and ensuing wars. In Chigurh’s final scene, he gives Carla Jean the chance to flip a coin to save herself. Her initial act of defiance turns the tables on Chigurh and reminds him that these decisions are his own and not the coin. But her words fall on deaf ears, as Chigurh is seen checking his boots as he leaves the house, meaning that she likely met the fate of so many of Chigurh’s victims before her. Throughout the movie, Chigurh is an unstoppable force, surviving encounters with Llewelyn Moss, bounty hunter Carson Wells, and an unexpected car crash. This speaks to the longevity of imperialism and the difficulty in eliminating the concept even in present day society. This ties in with Sheriff Ed Tom Bell’s changing views throughout the film. Ed Tom Bell starts off with the impression that life used to be different before and that the nature of evil has grown to be more sinister with time. But by the end of the movie, he realizes that life has always been this way and that he had just never realized it. Likewise, imperialism has always existed and continues to exist to this day. But much like Chigurh and his irregular weapons, imperialism operates under different guises as time progresses.

**Comparison**

In *American Sniper*, imperialism is presented through the hegemonic protagonist, whereas *No Country for Old Men* presents the concept through a nontraditional antagonist. Nontraditional in the sense that Chigurh possesses traits commonly assigned to the hero in the American monomyth, as seen by his ultimate success and fade into obscurity. But while Kyle is protecting the harmonious Eden that is America and its beliefs, Chigurh is protecting only his own cryptic and abstract principles. The difference in the characters of Kyle and Chigurh as playing opposite roles of hero and villain is paramount as this demonstrates the conflicting acknowledgment of cultural imperialism. Out of context, Chris Kyle is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Iraqi soldiers while the American military invades the Middle East. *American Sniper* contextualizes these kills by dehumanizing the Iraqis and painting America and its beliefs as a utopia that must be defended. On the other hand, *No Country for Old Men* humanizes the characters that fall at the hand of the merciless Chigurh. By doing so, imperialism is cast in a detrimental light as Chigurh murders innocent individuals while operating under principles that the audience cannot understand.

The thematic settings aid in defining imperialism in both films. Though a combat film, *American Sniper* maintains the hegemony with strong influence from traditional Westerns. Kyle is not just represented as a hero, but a brave cowboy who must commit violent acts as a means of defending his community. The cowboy must act outside of the law in order to serve justice, similar to how Kyle must operate outside of standard moral and ethical principles, such as killing women and children, for the greater good. With the traditional hegemony and in Western films, the purpose of the protagonist is clear and the audience is able to relate with him, thus allowing for a rationalization of cultural imperialism. *No Country for Old Men*, as a postmodern Western, puts forth a much more critical interpretation of cultural imperialism. Chigurh is an antagonist that possesses some qualities typically reserved for heroes but works to impose his self-righteous, yet cryptic principles on others. His actions are imperialistic in nature, as demonstrated by his insistence of others to adhere to his own principles and refusal to take responsibility for what he is doing. But unlike *American Sniper*, Chigurh’s motives are never made clear and thus his victims and the audience cannot reconcile his destructive actions.