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Ambiguous Justice in *No Country for Old Men*

No Country for Old Men, by Cormac McCarthy, is a multifaceted novel, rife with deep criticisms of humanity hidden behind a seemingly simple plot. While Cormac McCarthy wrote and published the piece in 2005, the actual events of the novel take place in 1981, immediately following the horrific Vietnam War (of which the novel has much to say). The story takes place in the vicinity of the border between the U.S. and Mexico, and covers an illegal drug deal gone wrong in the bloody Texas frontier. The novel's complex themes and ideas are hidden behind vulgar slang, Western tone, and McCarthy's curt, simple writing style; in retrospect, the novel could even be read at an elementary school level. *No Country for Old Men* concerns three main characters—Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, Llewelyn Moss, and Anton Chigurh—and the absorbing story that links their lives. Anton Chigurh is a psychopathic hitman who abides to a personal philosophy: he is not to be blamed for any murder he commits, because fate put those people in his path. In many ways, Chigurh and his eerie personality separates the novel from other Western classics (and other novels by McCarthy for that matter). Chigurh is hired to find the drugs and money from a Mexican drug deal gone wrong, a drug deal Llewelyn Moss had previously stumbled upon and stolen a briefcase "level full of hundred dollar banknotes" (McCarthy 19) from—close to 2 million dollars in bloodmoney. From this point on, three parties hunt Moss: the Mexicans, Chigurh, and the law-enforcement led by Sheriff Bell. Moss sets out on the run, mainly from Chigurh, roaming state to state and even crossing the border. Moss summarizes his

main conflict—"I took somethin that belongs to em and they want it back" (McCarthy 330)—right before getting shot by the Mexican drug dealers. After the death of Moss, Chigurh steals back the money and returns it to the rightful owner, and then kills Moss' wife. The Mexicans then crash Chigurh's car, severely injuring him and sending him into hiding. Though Sheriff Bell never directly encounters either Chigurh or Moss (or at least not while they're alive), he follows the vortex of violence by investigating aftermaths of encounters, offering analyses of the situation in the brief vignettes at the beginning of every chapter. By the end of the novel, after around 22 murders, the only main characters remaining alive are Chigurh himself, and Sheriff Bell, who resigns as sheriff after vicariously experiencing Chigurh's actions and losing faith in the justice system.

Though *No Country for Old Men* discusses diverse topics, the novel as a whole cultivates a certain ambivalence surrounding the problem of justice. As Benjamin Mangrum indicates in his article, McCarthy uses the interdependent identities of Chigurh and Bell as dual subversions of the illusory presupposition undergirding democratic justice (Mangrum 107-108). Within the bounds of conventional morality, Bell represents the democratic state and thus its sense of civic justice (Mangrum 112)—what is "right" and what is "wrong"—because he is, by profession, a sheriff. Yet after encountering the "true and living prophet of destruction"(McCarthy 2), Bell cannot comprehend the sheer brutality of Chigurh's actions such as killing a random citizen for his car, or killing Moss' wife after the death of Moss just because she indirectly came into his life. The two are unequivocally different—Bell loves old timers (McCarthy 81) and family history while Chigurh is a ghost (McCarthy 354) and has no past; Bell follows socially-accepted rules while Chigurh acts as a proxy for fate (so to speak) with no apparent limits; Bell's actions

are based in subjective analysis of situations while Chigurh replaces morality with a "deterministic order of material chaos" (Mangrum 117)—or so it seems.

Consider the relationship between Bell and Chigurh: Bell indicates in the novel that Chigurh had "done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd come to" (McCarthy 2). In other words, Chigurh had altered Bell in his views of society and the failing justice system; he changed Bell, the implication here being that Bell's character surprisingly depends upon Chigurh. Yet this relationship is a one-way street, because Chigurh's character would be the same (presumably) with or without Bell as he steadfastly abides by his philosophy throughout all his murders. Seeing as how Bell represents democratic justice, McCarthy carefully crafts this relationship to express how democratic justice exists because of a destructive force like Chigurh (Mangrum 117). And this notion questions the efficacy of any justice system, because in a world of ubiquitous violence, if justice depends on violence, there exists no peace. And if there is no peace, there seems to be no real point in enforcing justice.

Bell adopts this pessimistic mindset and resigns as Sheriff, as he saw the problem of violence in America as an intrinsic problem within humanity rather than problem for law enforcement (Cooper 303). But this very problem of violence speaks to a greater trend in American society, transcending the confines of the book as Micah O'Donnell explains in his article. O'Donnell treats *No Country for Old Men* as a warning against the ongoing violence created by a culture obsessed with guns (17). And it seems to be true, in that McCarthy emphasizes firearms and guns in the novel to such an extent, that if there is a gun present in any scene, the reader can be "assured" that there will be a detailed description of it, such as appearance and brand (O'Donnell 19). The novel emphasizes guns and only guns, and is "completely void" of other American cultural paradigms such as sex (O'Donnell 18). In essence,

O'Donnell shines light on the inexplicable culture shift of American society towards violence as implied by McCarthy. Like characters in the novel, citizens purchase guns to keep themselves safe in case of danger, inevitably leading to more violence, leading to purchasing more guns to *feel* more safe, leading to more violence, and the situation spirals out of control as shown in the novel where almost everyone has their own firearm and thus has the potential to cause harm. This is where the problem of violence originates, according to O'Donnell, and thus calls into question justice in America—in a country "obsessed with war" (25), how can ideal of justice prevail?

And this problem concerning the ambiguity of justice is not constricted to domestic boundaries, but rather extends beyond national boundaries as Erika Spooden explains. The setting of *No Country for Old Men* is in the 1980's so it's appropriate to think of the novel as a reflection of post-Vietnam malaise. In fact, all three main characters are veterans, with Sheriff Bell a World War 2 veteran, Anton Chigurh a Special Forces veteran, and Moss a former Vietnam sniper (Spooden 76). Though explicit references to Vietnam are often made, the ideology of true justice shows itself in the hidden connections Spooden makes. For example, consider the beginning of the story with Moss attempting to shoot deer in a desolate desert. The desert is much like a war-zone, in which veterans such as Moss seek refuge from past horrors of war, a place that draws him to overshadow a personal sense of defeat (Spooden 77), presumably from losing the war. According to Spooden, the fact that Moss, Wells, and Chigurh mostly stick to outer limits of civilian life speaks to how Vietnam war veterans were sucked into a "social vacuum"(82), ostracizing veterans and denying them their normal lives and deserved recognition. Both Chigurh and Moss, despite their differences, are drawn to the ends of the American Dream (Spooden 83), one becoming a fugitive with 2 million dollars in blood money

and the other a psychopathic hitman. Then there is Bell, who lives with the guilt of receiving a medal of honor though what he did was abandon his troops and run, by acting as a Sheriff (Spooden 86)—trying to protect those around him now, to make up for when he could not.

There is undoubtedly a myriad of connections between Vietnam veterans, and characters in the novel; yet looking even deeper, there is an underlying theme of injustice. It is injustice that Vietnam war veterans such as Moss and Chigurh and Bell, after returning from fighting a war they were drafted into, came back to a vitriolic America. It is injustice that veterans were pushed to extremes to live, such as Chigurh and Moss. And furthermore, it is certainly injustice that Vietnam veterans bear the responsibility (in the novel and in modern society) of the horrors committed in Vietnam (Spooden 77). Amidst the inner workings of an effort based in bringing justice (namely war), there exists so much injustice that it shrouds any purpose of the effort in a cloud of ambiguity.

Parting from the plot itself, a facet of *No Country for Old Men* that adds to the obscurity surrounding justice, is McCarthy's writing style and unique structure. As Lydia R. Cooper writes in her article, *No Country for Old Men* is separated from McCarthy's older works because it leaves the characters "flat" and "two-dimensional" (37). The novel lacks McCarthy's characteristic convoluted and archaic diction, and avoids "didacticism" (Cooper 39). The paucity of the descriptive language accentuates the scenes where McCarthy uses imagery, thus allowing for a more dramatic effect when talking about themes such as justice. The curt style and simple language adds to the seemingly simple nature of the novel, which in turn hides complex ideas regarding justice; McCarthy reduces the storytelling to a bare depiction of events to reflect a naive view of justice, and adds "ambiguously-related" snippets of prophetic interpretation (Cooper 39), usually in the form of Bell's monologues at the beginning of a chapter, to hint at the

more complex interpretations of justice. This bizarre mixture of styles when talking about central themes such as justice, the continuous switching of styles "again and again" (White 50), creates inevitable confusion for the reader mirroring the confusion surrounding the ideal of justice.

Interestingly, the title of the novel itself hides various implications concerning justice as J.M White discusses in his brief review of the novel. The title of the novel is derived from the first line in William Butler Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium", which expresses as many of the sentiments expressed in the novel (49)—especially the effects of aging. Cooper supports this premise in her article saying that the novel draws many of its ideas regarding aging from the poem (42).White indicates that McCarthy, aged into his seventies and facing old age, might be using the "old voice of the sheriff" as a mean of speaking to the reader (50-51). And this makes sense, because Bell's brief monologues at the beginning of the chapter are the only times the narration switches from a third-person omniscient voice to first-person narrative frames (Cooper 37).

But the connection between aging and the ambiguity of justice lies in *how* Bell aged in the novel. Chigurh represents the "new kind"(McCarthy 1) of people, reflecting the world's propensity to change. And in such a world, where the limits of justice (as in the limits of what either side will go to) are fluid, Bell indicates that "there was a part of me too that just wanted to pull everybody back in the boat" (McCarthy 421)—the "boat" representing the herd mentality that determines what justice means to society (Mangrum 113). So Bell's job as sheriff counts on his understanding of justice, an understanding that is subject to changes in society over time. Thus, when Bell encounters Chigurh and is brought to a place he didn't think he would come to (McCarthy 2), the ideal of true justice falls apart and he resigns. Therefore when White references Yeats's poem, he points to the fact that Bell ages because of loss of faith in the ideal

of justice. And by connecting Bell's issues regarding age to those of McCarthy's, White implies that McCarthy uses Bell's resignation to elucidate the inherent ambiguity in justice.

Among all the novels I have read in my brief literature career, *No Country for Old Men* is undeniably the most intriguing and enthralling. And it is not because of the little connections, or the captivating storytelling, but because the novel had this uncanny ability to provoke deep reflection—it scratched that part of my brain that brings forth the weirdest of questions, questions that make me ponder pillars of society. And it is not that these questions never occurred to me, but rather the unearthly way McCarthy provoked those same thoughts with language that elementary school kids could read. To underscore how imaginatively critical this novel is, consider that the novel made me empathize, for however brief a moment, with a psychopathic hitman—it made me understand where Chigurh was coming from (though I'm not condoning his behavior in in any way), and that struck me as amazing. The novel felt complete on many levels, plot wise and ideologically, because it allures the reader into contemplating the complex ideas hidden behind its simple story. I'm nothing but thankful I chose to read *No Country for Old Men*, and I hope to read such resonating literature in the future.

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