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No Country for Old Men

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No Country for Old Men

Abstract

This is a review of *No Country for Old Men* (2007).

In *No Country for Old Men*, Joel and Ethan Coen have captured the spirit of Cormac McCarthy's novel and fashioned it into two and a half hours of breathtaking filmmaking. The film and the novel tell the story of a busted drug deal in Texas in 1980 to explore the nature of overwhelming evil in the world, the (in)ability of good to confront it, and the ordinary people who get caught in between. The film opens as a deputy arrests Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem as one of the most heinous villains in recent cinema), a detached psychopath that murders his victims with an air gun. Chigurh arrives on the scene to recover \$2 million that Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) happened across while out hunting antelope. Chigurh pursues Moss, methodically leaving a trail of death and destruction about which Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones in yet another brilliant performance) must make some kind of sense.

The film is full of perfect performances and stunning cinematography; however, its meditation on good and evil is its most compelling feature. McCarthy and the Coen brothers do not take any shortcuts here as they refuse to flinch from the soulless violence that Chigurh metes out. Yet they do not question Sheriff Bell or Moss' convictions either; the characters do this enough to each other. Some viewers might reference Chigurh's immorality, Sheriff Bell's moral simplicity, or Moss' naïveté; however, these ideals really have nothing to do with it.

Chigurh is not so much immoral as he is amoral. When Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), a bounty hunter, tells him he is crazy and that he does not have to kill him, Chigurh looks at him as if he is from a different planet. It almost seems as if Chigurh has been teleported from some ancient biblical era where he served as an angel of death with no regard for right or wrong, only duty. He justifies some of his murders through a coin toss in which the victim has to "call it." He couches this coin toss in a philosophical treatise on fate, choice, and life well lived, yet ultimately blaming the results on the coin. When Moss' wife, Carla Jean (Kelly Macdonald), virtually disarms his argument that the coin decides his victims' fate, his only response is to murder her as well.

Sheriff Bell's narration and conversations with his wife and deputy reveal a man overwhelmed by the evil of his day. He argues that "it's hard to take its measure." This might as well be the most succinct response to a film that demands repeated viewings. Faced with Chigurh's ruthlessness, we might all abandon hope at the theater doors, yet it is in Sheriff Bell's concluding speech that we find a glimmer of hope. Bell tells his wife of a dream in which his father (a former sheriff) rides past on horseback with a cone of fire. Bell says he knows little else about what his father is doing or where he is going other than the fact that his father will be waiting for him up ahead when he gets there. Here, it seems that McCarthy and the Coen brothers signal some kind of hope beyond this present darkness.

Yet in the meantime, there might just be no response to Chigurh's threats. Moss tries to respond and loses everything in the process. The evil that he faces is too much for one man and, perhaps, all of humanity. Of course, there might be one recourse with which the Coen brothers are most adept at dealing. When Sheriff Bell reads a horrific news story to his deputy about a couple that tortures and murders elderly people and cashes their social security checks, the deputy snickers and then quickly apologizes. Sheriff Bell responds, "That's ok...sometimes that's all you can do." As would be expected, the Coen brothers have put humor in places we would least expect in *No Country for Old Men*, lightening the tension that would otherwise smother us.

The Coen brothers' ability to weave comedy and drama of the utmost seriousness, along with spot-on casting and flawless performances have all resulted in one of their best films to date and certainly one full of fodder for theological discussion.