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Ashish Chand  
*San Jose State University*

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## How the West was Lost

### Keywords

cormac mccarthy, no country for old men, book review

## How the West was Lost

*Ashish Chand*

The year 1980 marked a turning point for America. The free love culture of the 1960s was long gone and the disco lights of the 1970s were beginning to dim. A new culture of drugs and violence started to take hold. It is against this cultural evolution that Cormac McCarthy chooses to set his novel *No Country for Old Men*. The story follows Llewelyn Moss, a mostly good-natured welder who stumbles upon the remains of a drug deal gone horribly wrong. No one is left alive, intentionally. The lone survivor begs Moss for a drink of water, with all thoughts of drugs and money having left his being through the gunshot wounds that have riddled his body. Upon further investigation of the grisly scene, Moss discovers a satchel containing two million dollars. Moss' actions in this moment define the rest of the novel. He chooses to take it, knowing that this choice will take him down a path for which he is not quite prepared, but also a path he grossly underestimates.

Set against the dusty backdrop of the Texas-Mexico border, McCarthy paints a picture of the past being pushed into obsolescence by the future, and a bleak future it is, if he is to be believed. He anchors the reader to this idyllic and wholesome past with an old man and begins each chapter with the old man's italicized musings on the contrast between the world he has lived in and the one that is taking shape around him. The old man in question is Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, a small town lawman who is

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unable to fathom the coming wave. Sheriff Bell genuinely cares about the people in his county and attempts to look after them the way a shepherd looks after his flock. Bell begins an investigation into the massacre and the whereabouts of Moss with a grim hesitation.

If Bell represents the past and all of its idyllic virtues, then Moss represents the shift toward the future and the opportunities that this new future will bring. He is tempted by the prospects of change that this future promises, but he is never fully aware of what this future will cost. As he steps out into this uncharted landscape, he makes choices that conflict with his priorities and ultimately suffers for them.

Rounding out the temporal trifecta, McCarthy presents the reader with Anton Chigurh. Chigurh is McCarthy's nihilistic vision of the future: an emotionless and seemingly invincible killer with a shadowy origin sent to recover the money stolen by Moss. Chigurh focuses on his goal with the precision of a laser and shows Moss what the future contained in the satchel truly holds. From McCarthy (2005), "Not everyone is suited to this line of work. The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. In their minds. They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events perhaps where they are not" (p. 253). In this statement to his employer, Chigurh summarizes the lesson that Moss soon learns.

McCarthy's prose is almost primordial in nature. He ignores all the advances in writing style that have been made since humans first scribbled their guttural ramblings onto stone and eschews almost all forms of punctuation, save for the period. When other forms make rare appearances, one can almost feel a grumbling disdain, but also an acknowledgment of necessity. This makes for an initially distracting read for those unfamiliar

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with McCarthy's other works, but once all the players have been properly introduced and the pieces are set in motion, the reader sees that McCarthy's minimalism moves the novel along at a breakneck pace.

But what is it moving towards? There is a bleakness that pervades McCarthy's novel, one that the author does not attempt to conceal. There are no heroes in his version of the West. It becomes clear early on that nothing good will happen to any of these characters. McCarthy dismisses the reader's protests with a grumbling wave of his hand. Some readers may be put off by the blood-soaked violence that fills the pages, but just as McCarthy's sparse use of punctuation serves its purpose, so does his use of violence. The frequent blood-letting illustrates the kind of place that the world is becoming, the kind of place where old men have no influence, with their outdated values of goodness and decency and their romanticization of a time that never existed. Much like a car crash on the side of the freeway, the reader is unable to look away from the impending cataclysm.

McCarthy was 70 years old at the time of publication, making him around Sheriff Bell's age at the time in which the novel is set. As a man who rejects the technological innovations that the current time period has brought the world, it is easy to hear McCarthy's voice in Sheriff Bell's monologues, reminiscing about the past and pontificating on the future with a mix of nostalgia, cynicism, and regret.

Just as the present separates the past and the future, never allowing them to intersect, Bell and Chigurh never cross paths, because Bell never fully embraces the investigation. In trying to atone for past sins, which he reveals in confessions to family members, he realizes they have crippled him. The coming

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change is too much for him to deal with; Bell understands he is not cut out for this new world.

With *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy has crafted an important novel depicting a marked change in the American cultural landscape. Just as change is difficult to accept, the novel is sometimes difficult to read, comprehend, and accept. However, McCarthy is unwavering in his forlorn declaration: The future is not coming; it is already here. It is, indeed, no country for old men.

### Reference

McCarthy, C. (2005). *No country for old men*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

*Ashish Chand attends San Jose State University as a student of Forensic Science with an emphasis in Biology. His interests include psychopathy and vigilantism. He currently works as a Research Technician for Siluria Technologies, Inc., a clean technology startup based in San Francisco. He enjoys writing and long-distance running, and he has a love for things that grow.*

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