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# Moral Ambiguity in the Works of Cormac McCarthy

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MORAL AMBIGUITY IN THE WORKS OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

by

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is for my family, who has always supported me: specifically my sister, who is my best friend; my yia-yia, who I've carried with me my whole life; and mainly my mom, who has taught me everything I know & who is the reason I'm here today. This thesis is most *definitely* for my cats, Fitz & Pepper, who I love more than literally anything else. Most importantly, though, this thesis is for younger me, who just 5 years ago was wandering around with little hope or trajectory. I hope she knows she's got way better days ahead. Much love to each hand that has held mine along the way – I love you all.

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## ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's works have presented a question since he first published *The Orchard Keeper* in 1965 – what are his characters' motivations? McCarthy's novels are known for showing little to no interiority of his characters. This choice to depict action and not thought makes it nearly impossible to discern the reasoning behind the actions of the characters. Not being able to definitively know the motivations of the characters in his novels makes it hard to argue that his characters are simply "good" or "bad," and morality becomes hard to discern. Although actions such as murder appear immoral without having an interiority, knowing that the characters who commit these acts operate by their own moral codes, complicates the way we view morality in general. In two of his works, *Child of God* and *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy presents his audience with characters that seem easy to see as simply evil. In *Child of God*, we are presented with Lester Ballard, a murdering necrophile who kills women and steals their bodies away for his own pleasure. In *No Country for Old Men*, we are given Anton Chigurh, a serial killer who taunts victims with coin tosses, creates his own murder weapons out of bolt guns, and fails to so much as blink at the pull of a trigger. Interestingly, though, both of these killers make decisions that appear to be motivated by either the community around them or by a force greater than themselves, and both of these links are specifically religious. By trying to work through the murky motivations of these complex characters and their relationship to god, or lack of one, we can learn more about McCarthy's thoughts on violence, humanity, and morality.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy's works have presented a question since he first published *The Orchard Keeper* in 1965 – what are his characters' motivations? McCarthy's novels are known for showing little to no interiority of his characters. This choice to depict action and not thought makes it nearly impossible to discern the reasoning behind the actions of the characters. Not being able to definitively know the motivations of the characters in his novels makes it hard to argue that his characters are simply “good” or “bad,” and morality becomes hard to discern. Although actions such as murder appear immoral without having an interiority, knowing that the characters who commit these acts operate by their own moral codes, complicates the way we view morality in general. In two of his works, *Child of God* and *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy presents his audience with characters that seem easy to see as simply evil. In *Child of God*, we are presented with Lester Ballard, a murdering necrophile who kills women and steals their bodies away for his own pleasure. In *No Country for Old Men*, we are given Anton Chigurh, a serial killer who taunts victims with coin tosses, creates his own murder weapons out of bolt guns, and fails to so much as blink at the pull of a trigger. Interestingly, though, both of these killers make decisions that appear to be motivated by either the community around them or by a force greater than themselves, and both of these links are specifically religious. By trying to work through the murky motivations of these complex characters



and their relationship to god, or lack of one, we can learn more about McCarthy's thoughts on violence, humanity, and morality.

In *Child of God*, Ballard's alienation from the community pushes him towards committing his crimes, and both before and after his murders begin, McCarthy creates an implicit and explicit parallel between Ballard and Christ, calling him a child of god and underscoring the figurative resurrection of his victims. Meanwhile, Chigurh is preoccupied with the fact that the violence he perpetrates cannot be avoided. When he commits murders, he frequently uses objects to symbolize what he believes is already fated, like the flip of a coin. Before people die, he prompts his victims to accept that their deaths were fated, essentially justifying his crimes. These characters' justification of their actions coupled with the fact the communities around them play a large part in influencing or enforcing their actions, blurs the lines between good and evil. The communities themselves are usually equally complicit in some form of violence, even if it is not the same violence these men are committing. McCarthy directly calls out the world's hypocrisy in how we choose to accept certain kinds of violence by comparing the murderous violence of his anti-heroes (Ballard and Chigurh) with the everyday violence of their communities. In many cases, the latter seems more terrifying.

McCarthy scholars debate whether McCarthy is a nihilist who rejects ideas of religion by parodying them or whether he is a religious writer who shows what religious figures look like in a violent world. From this discussion stems the argument about morality. Questions arise first about whether or not morals even exist as we are familiar with them in worlds so bleak, and then, if the answer is yes, the question becomes, what does that morality look like? Lydia R. Cooper attempts to provide answers to these

questions throughout her book *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy* (2011). In Cooper's book, she discusses the tenuous relationship between the protagonists in McCarthy's novels and common concepts of right and wrong, morality, and heroes. For Cooper, Lester Ballard is just one example of McCarthy's novels that "follow the tortuous paths of characters who have in some way rejected humankind...in variously disordered worlds" (Location 532, 546). While it is true that Ballard does follow a torturous path, we miss a large part of his motivations in saying he has rejected mankind. In reality, the community has rejected him, leaving him no choice but to walk away from humanity. Thus, the community is directly implicated in his immoral acts. Similarly, when discussing *No Country for Old Men*, Cooper argues that "the novel does not necessarily privilege the worldview of either Chigurh, the psychopathic killer, or Bell, the lawman who hunts him," and that "violence is indeed so ubiquitous that upon first reading, the novel's audience may very well also shrug at the seemingly crazed killers rampaging around" (Location 2166). While Chigurh is not simply a psychopathic killer, Cooper's argument that violence is so pervasive in this world is poignant. Chigurh's acts may be immoral, but in a novel where all characters commit or perpetuate violence, this immorality is challenged – something that happens in *Child of God* from the very beginning.

Through the title *Child of God*, McCarthy immediately raises questions about the moral and religious significance of his main character. How could Lester Ballard, a twisted and horrendous figure, be a savior? Ashley Combest asks this same question in her analysis: "The title of the novel, fitting for a world in need of salvation, would seem to offer up a savior, but is Lester Ballard, a murdering necrophile, this 'child of God' as

the novel suggests?” (14). For Combest, this “dark parallel” establishes that that Ballard is a god in his own right, though not perhaps a Christian one, instead a “dark and terrible” deity that controls a dead underworld and successfully commands the weather to freeze (15). Combest differentiates Ballard from Christ, pointing out that he is not “‘resolved’ to die for the sins of the world . . . [and] offers no regeneration . . . no sacrifice or act of any kind” (15-16). She concludes that Ballard is not a Christ or an Antichrist but simply the product of a doomed world, a world that allows him. I propose that Ballard’s connections to Christianity and regeneration are more significant than this argument allows. Specifically, if we see the world in *Child of God* as a godless one, Ballard’s proximity to Christ becomes symbolic rather than incarnational. I argue that McCarthy uses this parallel to emphasize the meaning that the community attributes to Ballard’s crimes and their use of him as a scapegoat for their collective ills. In this sense, Ballard does take on all of their sins, though he does not absolve them.

While Chigurh does not have the same kind of religious parallels as Lester Ballard, he does have motivations rooted in something he views as greater than himself – a dedication to what he believes is fated or predetermined. Chigurh believes his actions are justified, but those around him do not, and many scholars agree that he has no justification. Many critics have theorized about Chigurh’s intentions in the novel. Most focus on Chigurh’s determinism, psychopathy, and his role as a “prophet of destruction.” Sean Braune argues that Chigurh is an “immoral” character who is the “corrupt ‘pinnacle’ of . . . the post-human personality of the psychopath” (1). He claims that Chigurh relies on chance in order to “survive more effectively” and to “legitimize [his] own subject positions” (2, 5). Dismissing Chigurh as an immoral psychopath, however,

minimalizes the power he has over the characters in the novel. Like Ballard, Chigurh becomes a symbol of cosmic forces for the people around him. Chigurh may appear to have no remorse, but McCarthy makes it hard for us to say he has no morality, no moral code; instead he creates his own, and his justification of his actions is based on fatalism. The novel itself, through Chigurh, seems to ask the questions, “How do we decide what is justified? Does creating justice make us godlike?” Vincent Allan King discusses Chigurh’s repeated notions of “playing God” and argues that “Chigurh’s fantasy is...absurd...instead of embracing a false God, he pretends to *be* a God” (550). Chigurh may appear to play God, but even he directly rejects this. In reality, he is simply projecting himself into a godlike position for very similar reasons why the community posits Lester Ballard into their narratives – they both must fill a void that a godless world creates.

These two novels are particularly complex in their continual attempts to justify these characters’ seemingly devious actions, and the choice to use religious symbolism to parallel actions such as murder and necrophilia is quite tenuous. Can individuals who commit terrible acts and who constantly go against typical conventions of morality be considered religious characters? And how does the murkiness of their motivations plan into this? Through Ballard and Chigurh, McCarthy comments on society’s perceptions of those it classifies as outcasts and evildoers. These characters are framed—by themselves, their communities, or both--as godlike figures in order to fill the void that exists without them.

## CHAPTER 2

### LESTER BALLARD AS SAVIOR

Cormac McCarthy is no stranger to portraying evil and menacing figures in his works. In his third novel, *Child of God* (1973), McCarthy gives rise to just this kind of figure with his portrayal of Lester Ballard, an outcast turned murderer and necrophile. A character like Ballard is easy for us to disidentify with, a character we could quickly label as evil and move on. However, McCarthy does not allow us this ease or this separation, as he rarely does, and this is mainly due to moral ambiguity of Ballard. While Ballard's acts are clearly not moral in themselves, some of his unclear motivations force us to question whether Ballard is as evil as he is made to be by the townspeople of Sevier County. Counterintuitively, Ballard is a particularly sympathetic character, mainly because he has been ostracized from his community, to the point that just entering a crowd of people forces someone to "Holler at the sheriff" (6). This rejection largely leads to Ballard's need to kill women in order to solve his loneliness. Strangely, while Ballard is committing these criminal acts, he is constantly surrounded by religious imagery, particularly Christ imagery. There is an acute tension in continually pairing such a grotesque and horrid figure with a pure and holy one. To do so seems blasphemous and irreconcilable; however, it is not ignorable as in the text Ballard provides figurative regenerations and resurrections, as troublesome as they may end up being, and serves as the scapegoat for his community. By paralleling religious symbolism with the corrupt and

twisted Ballard, McCarthy forces us to question what a Christ figure looks like in a novel that largely rejects the presence of God.

It is an understatement to say Lester Ballard is an outcast in his community. The very first scene in the book sees Ballard forced from his own land and severely attacked by a blow to the head that caused him to “never...hold his head right after” and “thowed his neck out someway or another” (9). Additionally, throughout the book Ballard is criminalized by the very community that should support him, even before he commits any heinous acts. In one scene, he is falsely accused of rape and jailed for several days. After being released, the sheriff asks him “what sort of meanness” he has planned for next (56), but before this encounter with the woman and the sheriff, the worst thing it seems Ballard has done is to be a crude drunk. While he is not necessarily a good citizen, nothing he has done so far seems quite so terrible in a community where fathers rape their daughters (27-28) and children bite the legs off birds (79). However, while Ballard is alive, the community will not accept him, forcing him into a terrible loneliness. It is in part this loss of community that drives Ballard to commit the acts of necrophilia and murder. As Alexandra Blair points out, “critics often point toward the Sevier community’s rejection of Lester Ballard and his desire for companionship as one of the central causes of his actions and a reason readers should feel sympathy towards him” (95). Understanding this sympathy is necessary in order to understand how Ballard functions as a Christ figure in this situation. Particularly, it is important to explore not just what the community is doing but *why* they are doing it.

The community of Sevier county uses Lester Ballard as their scapegoat. They adopt him as a symbol of extreme violence, demonizing him even after his death, without

ever admitting their culpability. Throughout the novel, there are seven vignettes that take place at an unknown point after Ballard's death where the townspeople discuss how they remember Lester Ballard. These vignettes appear to take on the genre of a documentary. While we do not know who the townspeople are talking to, we do know that they are responding to off-page questions by an unknown source. In these sections, as Patty Kirk says, the community makes Ballard out to be much worse than he actually is, portraying "a character they have invented" (53). In the vignettes, the townspeople talk of small things that do not matter, these actions do not seem that extreme compared to the stories told about the townspeople. The townspeople recall that Ballard once punched another boy in the face (18) and that once he shot too well at the fair and was not allowed to play anymore (57). However, as Kirk points out, they also recall odd acts of other people in the community like how old Gresham sang the chickenshit blues at his wife's funeral (22), and these acts are not demonized like Ballard's are. By showing us how the townspeople mistreat him and then quoting their judgmental language when interviewed by the documentary filmmakers about Ballard, McCarthy reveals their culpability in making a monster. Before Ballard begins his serial murders, the community is, from the reader's perspective, an even playing field of violence. This is not to say that every character is violent, but that the violence is spread across the community, and they are almost all either participant or complicit in it. Thus, from the beginning of the book, the community has a desire to push their own sins away and onto someone else. Ballard becomes this someone. By putting all their violence upon him, making him the worst of them based on their own invented narratives and pushing him out of the community, the townspeople can maintain a sense of purity.

However, this purity is a façade. By separating their own actions from Ballard's crimes, the community can retreat to a false sense of social normalcy, one where Lester Ballard is a "direct affront to their sense of righteousness" (Franks 85). For the community in *Child of God* to be violent is to be sinful, and rather than expiate their sins, they deny their own violent natures. While not sinless himself, Ballard is burdened with the sins of the community in order for them to maintain innocence. In this way, he does die for their sins, even if he never realizes it. Their false sense of piety drives Ballard from the community and then forces him to commit his horrific acts in a desperate attempt to find community. Once Ballard is dead, the community feels absolved, and they can, in a way, regenerate, telling his stories while washing their hands of them and believing they live in a world anew, a world without terrible violence. However, because this belief is hollow, McCarthy implies that this cycle must recur. They will always find a new scapegoat, and this relationship to violence will always continue.

In the last section of the book, we learn that Ballard has murdered women in order to sleep with their corpses. The scapegoating and ostracization have effectively turned him into a monster. Ironically, while his actions towards the end of the novel are heinous and horrific, that is never what the townspeople focus on when they condemn him; they never narrate the details of Ballard's necrophilic acts, even when they have full knowledge of them. Travis Franks' explanation for this is that the townspeople do not want to be like Lester Ballard, but they are. They try to criminalize him while "[suppressing] what is most unsavory and potentially detrimental to the community as a whole" in order to maintain a level of separation from Ballard (Franks 77). Admitting Ballard's crimes implicates them in not only violence in general but in the violence they



are complicit in – to admit Ballard’s deepest violence is to admit their own. They want to be absolved of their crimes and to purify themselves. Singling Ballard out as the evil “you can trace...back to Adam” who “[outstrips] em all” allows them to maintain this sense of purity (81). Additionally, René Girard discusses this unwillingness to admit a scapegoat in his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Girard says that “unsuccessful scapegoat[s] whose heroic willingness to die for the truth, will ultimately make the entire cycle of satanic violence visible to all people and therefore inoperative” (2). Essentially, if the community were to admit their role in Ballard’s scapegoating in any way, it would force them to acknowledge their own violence, and their system would fall apart.

Not only do the people of the community never discuss Ballard’s acts, the reader is rarely privy to them either. We see Ballard sleep with and take his first body, but even this is not shown in great detail. The narrator describes Ballard as “a crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse” who said to the body “everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman,” and that is the only time we witness the necrophilia itself (88). This shows the sympathetic nature of Ballard; he is forced into such a terrible loneliness that he has never been able to share intimacy with a human woman – he can only share intimacy with a corpse. Much more focus is given to what happens to the body after Ballard takes it; he treats the body like a human, buying it lingerie and sitting it by the fire. After this body is demolished in a fire, he must kill more women to get more bodies. Although Ballard kills multiple people, we only see him shoot two in the novel; one victim is the daughter of his friend Ralph and the other is a random girl in the car with her lover, but McCarthy does not include an extended scene of them dying, and when it comes to the necrophilia, we never see him sleep with the corpses again; we only see that

he has several bodies “[lain] like saints” in a cave (135). McCarthy is both not letting us see the worse of his crimes, and he does not have the community tell us either. This omission puts the focus less on the crimes themselves but on Ballard’s motivations and his reasoning, which emphasizes the aforementioned sympathetic nature. McCarthy is forcing the reader to look at why Ballard was forced into the situation he is in.

Rene Girard frequently argues that the act of scapegoating is, in itself, inherently religious. The desire to shift blame and to have someone to accept our wrongdoings is symbolic of a need of a higher power. In his book *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, he states, “Since the sacrificial principle is the fundamental principle of the human order—up to a certain point human beings need to pour out their violence and tensions onto scapegoat” (Ch. 5). Inherently, Girard argues, human beings desire this scapegoat because it symbolizes that there is something that can take on their sins and relieve them of that burden. This is most clearly seen in, of course, the figure of Jesus in the Christian religion. The idea that a figure like Christ can take on all the sins of the world and leave us blameless both absolves us of our own evil and allows us a sense of purity. In this understanding of Girard, we can see scapegoating as an ability to fill some kind of void, to posit a god in a world where there is not one and to feel like there is meaning and purpose to things like necrophilia and murder. This is what the community of Sevier County is doing with Lester Ballard. While Ballard himself is not a blameless being like Christ, he is being used as a scapegoat for the community both for them to have a sense of absolution and for them to continue to feel like the violence around them has purpose.

As a scapegoat, Ballard serves a sacrificial function but not a redemptive or moral one. The community's repression of the violence around them does not make it cease to exist; in fact, it is arguably the opposite. Because they have been able to blame all of their wrong-doing on a single monster, their unjustifiable clear consciences also open ground for more violence to occur in the community. The community never regenerates; they only believe they do, meaning that all of the images of regeneration seen in the book may parallel Christian imagery, but they are really void of meaning. The meaning that the townspeople assign to Ballard's deeds stems from the same place the scapegoating does – a need to recuperate religion where there is none. These images of regeneration exist as a way for McCarthy to show the falsehood of Christ-like figures. By paralleling Ballard with Jesus, he is able to make the reader question what the purpose is of having a figure that allows us to be absolved of sin instead of acknowledging it. These regenerative images are not the only Christ-like symbols in the book, however.

The “regeneration” of the community throughout the book makes way for the burial, rebirth, and resurrection that happens at the end of the novel. Towards the end of the novel, Ballard tries to kill Greer, the man who is now living on his land, and fails. Instead, he gets his arm shot off, and while he is in the hospital, a group of vigilantes kidnap him and force him to take them to where he has hidden the bodies of his victims. Ballard escapes the men by losing them in the cave in which he has been keeping his victims, but he ends up lost and trapped underground – effectively buried in a tomb. He spends exactly three days wandering before he finds the exit to return to the world, the same time Jesus spent in the tomb before his resurrection. Once again, the reader is given an image that is almost Christ-like but does not perfectly fit the puzzle. While the only

time measured in numbers is a three, we know Ballard is actually in the cave longer than the symbolic three days. The Christological allusion on the surface is actually a failed image of resurrection. While Ballard does escape the cave, it is not one he was buried in for being pure, he does not come back to life, and the only difference between the Ballard that goes in and the one that comes out, is that he returns to the hospital where he can say that he is “supposed to be [there]” (192). Ironically, while Jesus’ resurrection proves to others that he was not sinful, Ballard’s resurrection proves to himself that he is.

In the end, Ballard is sent to a mental hospital where he eventually dies, and his body is donated to science, completely eviscerated. However, once his body is destroyed, in the last pages of the novel, the bodies of his victims are found and slowly lifted from the ground in a scene that parallels Revelation. In the Bible, the first resurrection after Christ’s death, rebirth, and second coming happens when the dead leave their resting place to join him: “the dead shall be raised incorruptible...this is the first resurrection” (*King James Version* I Corinthians 15:52; Revelation 20:5). Combest claims that this is a twisted resurrection because “any sense of a spiritual resurrection becomes a grotesque puppet show” (16). Twisted it may be, but really it is a resurrection with little to no meaning save for what the community places upon it, and its strongest resonance really comes from what meaning it fails to have – just like the earlier imagery. The other characters are desperate to find the bodies of the victims, as previously seen in how the men kidnap Ballard from the hospital so that he can “show [them] where [he] put them people so they can be give a decent burial” (182). Just like in the vignettes where none of Ballard’s crimes are mentioned, the focus of the townspeople is, again, on maintaining the purity of the community, even the dead members. At the end of the book, when the

bodies are found, the community has a sense of closure, but the reader never actually sees what the raising of these bodies means. Ballard's crimes cause a resurrection that echoes the Bible, but whereas in the Bible this resurrection literally brings people to life so that they can follow their Christ figure, this resurrection is simply a discovery. Once again, it only allows the community to impose meaning based on their own narratives, and it is another empty Christ symbol.

Therefore, even though he is not a blameless creature, by looking at Lester Ballard's relationship with the community and the failed regeneration and resurrection he causes, we indeed see him emerge as a sort of ironic savior — a savior the community needs to absolve them of their violence and to posit some kind of god within a godless world. The community attempts to sacrifice him to claim that violence is separate from them, but even the narrator in *Child of God* himself is cognizant of this attempt and does not allow this separation, stating, "You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it" (156). The townspeople burden Ballard with the sins of the community in order to maintain their sense of purity, but there is no reality in which violence disappears, and this passage directly implicates them in the violence. In this, Ballard's function as a savior is questioned. He is a savior, yes, because there is a regenerative quality to his actions, but this regeneration only provides a mask of absolution. This role that is enforced onto Ballard by the community allows him to believe they are being saved from something they cannot really be saved from.

Vereen Bell sees McCarthy's depiction of Ballard, specifically his loneliness, desperate need for love, and eventual victims as a result of McCarthy's typical nihilism (37), and in a way he is right. McCarthy is using Lester Ballard to say that this twisted and forced meaning version of a savior is the best we are allowed if we are not willing to accept the violence around us or if we force a greater power into existence where there is not one. Bartlett claims that Lester belongs to a "nonhuman" world, but the world he belongs to is distinctly human (13). The nature of evil is human, and McCarthy is making us question humanity. Violence may be evil, but it is not erasable. There is no need to be saved from it, and there is no need to force figures like Lester Ballard to become the "evil" he is made out to be by the community. In the end, while they do not call him Christ-like or view him that way per-se, by using him as this image of a scapegoat, they directly cause the religious parallels around Ballard. Therefore, the failure of "good" in this novel stems from the failure of the community to recognize the realities of the world around them.

## CHAPTER 3

### ANTON CHIRUGH AS DELIVERER OF FATE

While in *Child of God*, McCarthy gives us a lost figure in Lester Ballard, driven to his crimes by a blame-shifting community, in *No Country for Old Men* (2005), he gives us quite the opposite with Anton Chigurh, a confident hitman who kills seemingly without remorse. With a usual McCarthy absence of clear motivations, one could chalk Chigurh's reactions up to his lack of emotion or empathy; however, there is evidence in the text that suggests Chigurh operates according to a moral law greater than himself. While he is in many ways a cold-blooded killer, he also seems to be concerned with how people process and accept their death. He often discusses the fact people have to die before killing them, asking them to understand that there is no other way. He asks them for their last words and uses symbols like coins to show whether or not it is time for someone to die. The book, however, never allows us to glimpse any kind of higher power. We see Chigurh's actions and hear his words, but we never see him talk to a god or figure that tells him people's fate. In some ways, this absence both complicates and reinforces his connection to something greater. While we know he is a hitman, we never see who has hired him or see them telling him what to do, which often makes it seem like his agency is autonomous. However, we also see no real proof that Chigurh speaks for fate or God, in spite of his claims to mete out destiny.

While Chigurh is not a scapegoat, he does serve as a godlike figure in an otherwise godless world. As Girard observes, people desire for there to be something

greater than themselves, even if it means seeing evil, because it means they have something to put their blame upon. In his book, *The Scapegoat*, he argues that “even in the most closed cultures men believe that they are free and open to the universal; their differential character makes the narrowest cultural fields seem inexhaustible from within. Anything that compromises this illusion terrifies us and stirs up the immemorial tendency to persecution” (Girard 22). Essentially, Girard believes that even if people reject the idea of God, their need for them to not be alone and to seek greater reason, results in a mythical interpretation of godlike figures (*When These Things Begin*, Ch. 5). Chigurh adopts that god-like position in his speeches to his victims. In a godless world rife with violence, inevitability, death, and ignorance, the closest figure to a god might just be a hitman, a person who can play judge, jury, and executioner. Chigurh sees his ability to take lives as a near-divine power, telling Carla Jean Moss that believers and nonbelievers alike “might find it useful to model [themselves] after God” (256). I argue that he does not use this tie to a higher power because he is a sociopathic killer who wants to play God. In fact, he rejects this parallel to God. Instead, Chigurh functions in a role so close to what being God would feel like that it makes him truly believe he operates as part of something greater than himself, even if there is nothing greater. Because Chigurh believes his acts to be holy, McCarthy’s association of Chigurh with Fate echoes the Christological imagery he uses to represent Ballard. The symbols of divination that Chigurh employs only have meaning because he and the world around him place that meaning upon it.

McCarthy alludes to divination in the second chapter of the book when Chigurh confronts a clerk at a gas station. Their conversation is awkward and unsettling, and the



clerk clearly becomes more and more uncomfortable as time moves forward, slowly realizing the danger he is in. Eventually, Chigurh asks the clerk, “What’s the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?” (55). Chigurh proceeds to flip the coin and forces the clerk to call it. Before the man calls the coin, Chigurh reads the date on the coin as 1958 and states that the coin has “been travelling twenty-two years to get here...And it’s either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it” (56). McCarthy insinuates that the man is calling his own life and that its length was predetermined before his birth. The man successfully calls heads, securing his life, and Chigurh speaks to the man about the importance of the coin, saying that “anything can be an instrument [but] people don’t pay attention. And then one day there’s an accounting. And after that nothing is the same” (57). This emphasizes that the coin is an image of what is fated; to Chigurh, objects, like the coin, can deliver the message for what decision needs to be made. From Chigurh’s perspective, the clerk’s fate—in this case, the freedom to live another day—was decided long ago. Chigurh follows the coin’s edict, just as many have done in history who believe a coin toss can determine God’s will. Caesar, for example, practiced flipism. When he or his generals could not make a decision, they would flip a coin because they believed God would reveal the correct answer to them (*Heads or Tails, The Tale*). The coin, both in the days of Caesar and for Chigurh, is the only power these men have to uncover the truth. Chigurh does not call this the man’s “lucky coin” (56) because it decided the man would live but because he sees it as proof that fate chose long ago that in this moment the man would not die. Just as the Fates in Greek mythology use the object of the string to measure out people’s lives and cut it when they die, so does Chigurh use the object of the coin to decide whether it is the clerk’s time to live or die.

This need for Chigurh to follow out what he sees is predetermined is also apparent in Carson Wells' and Carla Jean Moss's deaths. The book starts when veteran and hunter, Llewelyn Moss, comes across a drug shootout and walks away with the money on the scene, which is why Chigurh is after him in the first place – he believes the money should be returned to its rightful owner. Wells is hired to take down Chigurh and has apparently been tracking Chigurh for some time, at least well enough to “know [him] by sight” (139). In tracking down Chigurh, Wells was planning to help Moss, therefore also making him accountable for Moss's wrongdoings. Chigurh must kill Wells for the same reason that he must kill Moss—responsibility. Chigurh sees both these men as interfering with what he sees is fated, and therefore they must be punished. In fact, during Wells' death scene, even he is aware of the presence of fate and the inevitability of his demise, proving that it is not only Chigurh who believes in fate and its signs. Earlier in the story, Wells went into a room that stray bullets flew in during the shootout between Moss and Chigurh; one bullet went through an old woman's skull, then through a date in the calendar on the wall. Before Wells gets shot, he says, “By the old woman's calendar I've got three more minutes.” When Wells is in the presence of Chigurh, he interprets the symbols around him much as Chigurh interprets his coins. This tendency to look for signs and portents implies that Wells has a need to fill the void just as much as any other character. As for Carla Jean, Chigurh promised Moss that if he did not adhere to his requests, Carla Jean would be punished for his crimes. Even though she is “innocent” and there is no apparent good reason for her to be killed, Chigurh cannot go back on his word. To do so would be to eliminate his responsibility to carry out what he sees as predetermined and to, as he tells Carla Jean, “make [himself] vulnerable” (259). Chigurh

feels in a way protected by the idea that he knows who needs to die and when. If he does not see out what is fated, he has failed to be an agent of fate, and he loses the place he has posited himself in as part of a higher purpose. Then, there is no purpose; he is just a killer in a world rife with violence.

However, since Chigurh frequently kills people just because he says they have to die, one may argue that Chigurh is trying to kill because he wants to or because he enjoys it and that the concept of fate is just a façade of justification. When he is talking to Wells, he tells him the story of how he ended up arrested and in the position that the reader finds him in at the beginning of the novel. He said he “wanted to see if [he] could extricate [himself] by an act of will” and that he “believe[s] that one can. That such a thing is possible.” However, he also comes to the realization that this “was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do” (175). Chigurh believes to go against the will of fate is selfish and ignorant; one must be submissive to its path, and those that go against it are rebelling against what is fated, which is why people like Moss must be punished. At the same time, Chigurh wants to prove his will, a form of agency. Paradoxically, Chigurh combines submissiveness and will by casting himself as the executor of fate’s decrees.

In his confrontation with Wells, Chigurh clarifies that he does not see himself as a god, emphasizing his mortality and potential weakness. Wells says during their confrontation, “You think you’re outside of everything. But you’re not... You’re not outside of death” (177). Chigurh agrees that he is not outside of everything; however, death “doesn’t mean to [him] what it does to [Wells]” (177). Chigurh knows he is human and that one day he will die, but to him, that is not something to fear or to fight against like Wells or Carla Jean do before they die. He has accepted it because, to him, it is just

as much part of fate as anything else he enacts; while death and fate are not interchangeable, death is the most final image of what is fated. Additionally, Chigurh accepts that even though he is carrying out what he believes is inevitable, he knows he is not untouchable. He gets hurt multiple times in the novel, from getting shot to getting in a car accident. In light of getting shot he tells Wells, “Getting hurt changed me...Changed my perspective. I’ve moved on, in a way. Some things have fallen into place that were not there before. I thought they were, but they weren’t. The best way I can put it is that I’ve sort of caught up with myself. That’s not a bad thing. It was overdue” (173). For Chigurh to need to place himself as part of something greater than him, he must be subject to its will just like anyone else in the novel. Chigurh wants to teach his victims this humility and promulgates it like a religious creed.

Accordingly, Chigurh seems to need something from his victims, a conversion of his way of seeing the world. When Chigurh kills the man dying on the street after the shootout with Moss, he says to the man, “Look at me...Dont look away. I want you to look at me” (122). Similarly, right before he kills Wells, Chigurh tells him that he “thought [he] might want to explain [himself]” and keeps trying to get him to “admit [his] situation” (175-76). He tries to persuade him to have “dignity” in the situation, to “compose” himself and have “respect.” Finally, when he goes to kill Carla Jean at the end of the book, he seems to want something from her too. He asks her, “Is there anything that you’d like to say?” and he tells her that he “thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness” (256, 259). It is clear that Chigurh wants something from these people beyond just their death. Dealing out their destinies does not seem to be enough, and while the

religious symbolism falls short like it does for Ballard, there is a connection here. People who believe their actions are justified, especially when it stems from believing in a greater power, commonly desire for others to believe in the same power. Ironically, while the people who are about to die never seem to accept their fate as Chigurh wants them to, they do elevate him by singling him out as an evil and godlike figure. Their desperation to have meaning in a world that provides none makes them betray their own beliefs that their time to die has not been decided and that Chigurh is just a “psychopathic killer” without reason (141).

Where his victims cling to fate because of fear, Chigurh believes that it justifies his actions. Chigurh’s belief that his role as an agent of fate provides justification for his murders is in direct contrast to the way the other main characters justify their own acts. For example, while one might say Sheriff Bell has the clearest sense of justice in the novel and is the “good” guy, this is complicated as well. His ambivalence stems from society’s hypocrisy about violence’s constitutive role in human culture. McCarthy presents us with four main male characters who are all veterans and who discuss their experience fighting in their respective wars directly, and the way the main characters in the novel deal with this violence is completely different from how they view Chigurh’s. For example, when Bell is talking with Carla Jean about Moss, she claims that he has never killed anybody. When Bell reminds her that Moss was in Vietnam, she says, “I mean as a civilian” (130). She draws a clear distinction between violence in war and violence at home. Killing someone in a war is not considered murder and is not considered reprimandable. In order to avoid violence, as a society, we separate violence into realms where it is socially acceptable and where it is not. By pushing violence into a

war zone, making it acceptable then, and making it acceptable nowhere else, we are able to pretend a life without violence is achievable, just like the community in *Child of God*. This rejection of certain types of violence is seen again with Sheriff Bell in his vignettes, which, like the vignettes in *Child of God*, appear to be similar to a documentary or interview; however, here it is not an entire town being talked to, only Bell. Bell recounts to us and to Ellis the experience he had in war where he left his comrades behind, leaving him the only survivor of an attack. He expresses regret over not being able to save his fellow men, saying, "I had a choice. I could of stayed," and even though Ellis tells him he "couldnt of helped em," he sees himself as weak because he saved himself and not his men (277). However, while this decision to be violent in order to save other people's lives would have been justified in Bell's eyes, Chigurh's violence is not only seen by Bell as lacking reason but as being the worst violence he has ever seen. This is because Bell could not face violence once, and now he feels that if he were to face the violence in Chigurh, he could achieve penance for the violent acts that took his men.

This is particularly interesting because it is Bell who is the most perturbed by Chigurh's actions throughout the novel. It is Bell who is desperate to take him down, who sees him as a culmination of all that is evil, calls him the "prophet of destruction" (5) and who eventually uses him as the reason to quit the force. This is a man who not only sees violence every day, but who experienced the absolute worst of it in war. Despite this, Bell not only ranks certain types of violence as worse than others, but he sees the progression of violence as worsening over time. In a vignette about halfway through the book, Bell tells of a survey in which people answered the biggest problems in schools were "talkin in class and runnin in the hallways...things of that nature"; he then continues to say a

more recent survey showed the problems were “rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide (196). Bell uses this to prove his point that the world is getting worse, that people are getting more evil, more violent. However, this one argument does not appear very strong. Surely forty years ago there were rapes and murders; the only definitive difference Bell has is that people are reporting it more, that they are acknowledging it more. The idea that violence is a constant and unavoidable is something Bell cannot accept. Instead, by believing that violence gets worse as society declines and that figures like Chigurh embody the worst of it, he can justify his own cowardice. By blaming history and scapegoating Chigurh, Bell can walk away from being a sheriff just as he walked away from his men on the field. He may always regret leaving, but if he believes in an unconquerable violent foe, he can justify his actions. In this way, he is a direct foil to Chigurh.

Additionally, like Lester Ballard, Chigurh is treated somewhat like a scapegoat by Bell. Chigurh is not the image of a scapegoat in the way Ballard is because he does not take on the sins of an entire community. However, when Bell singles him out as a prophet of destruction, he indulges in a fantasy that if he were to kill Chigurh, he could eliminate violence, which is similar to how the community wishes to expunge violence through Ballard. Specifically, Bell’s vignettes in *No Country for Old Men* act similarly to the documentary vignettes in *Child of God*. Just as the community talks of Ballard’s crimes, so does Bell talk in these anecdotes about the events of his life, his town, and specifically Anton Chigurh. McCarthy dramatizes the process of meaning-making through storytelling in these vignettes, particularly the human tendency to blame a single person, whether Ballard or Chigurh, for systemic violence. Whether it be one person or an entire

community, someone desires that the violent actions of one person can absolve the violence of an entire community, much as violence in war, sanctioned by the community, is supposed to eliminate the need for violence elsewhere, particularly at home.

Essentially, while Anton Chigurh's actions are not caused by the community in the way Lester Ballard's are, the community's participation in his mythologization directly implicates them in the violence he causes. Chigurh believes that he is part of something greater than himself. Between the coin flipping, the way he acts like a religious figure asking for last words, and his confession that trying to remove one's self from fate is foolish, it is clear that Chigurh makes his decisions by what he believes is fated. The question that remains is, is that fate real? The fate in *No Country for Old Men* is real in the same way the regenerations and resurrections in *Child of God* are. Chigurh believes that fate exists just as the community believes their absolution exists. However, both of these actually come from humanity's need to project god-like figures and symbols where there are not any in order to find reason in the violence that surrounds them. This is why it is impossible to discern what the fate Chigurh operates by is. Is it Christian? Greek? Pagan? It does not work for any of those, and this is because it is not any of those. Fate is created as a method of justification, as part of a moral code, so it takes on the meaning the people around it place on it. Therefore, since both Chigurh sees himself as being part of something god-like, even though he is not god, and since the people around him like Wells and Bell reinforce this, it makes the fate real in a way. By trying to force order and ignore the violence most unsuitable to them, the people in *No Country for Old Men* are doomed to fall prey to these false images of god-like power.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Overall, in Cormac McCarthy's novels, he presents us with characters who have motivations that are hard to discern. Because these motivations are typically unclear, we judge their actions; however, throughout both of these novels, McCarthy does not allow the reader to separate themselves from these morally ambiguous characters. Lester Ballard is a necrophile and a serial killer, but he is also a sympathetic character who is scapegoated by his community, and McCarthy associates him with Christological imagery. Anton Chigurh is a hitman who kills seemingly without remorse, but he is also a man who makes decisions based on what he believes is fated. Additionally, McCarthy conflates the violent acts of these men with the violence of the community around them. Ballard is violent, but so are the people of Sevier County; Chigurh murders but so did every main male character who fought in a war. This is not to say that these characters' actions are not wrong, but they are rarely as separate as their respective communities wish them to be. In both cases, the characters and community are hypocritical in their understanding of violence, something McCarthy rejects both in his novels and in interviews. By associating both of his anti-heroes with belief systems (Christianity and fate) that make sense of evil, McCarthy comments on how the world chooses to view violence.

In an *New York Times* interview, McCarthy condemned contemporary thought that imagines that humans could progress past the need for violence:

“There's no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous” (qtd. in Woodward).

For McCarthy, to ignore violence is to ignore the reality of being alive. Violence is inherent in humanity; there is no way to get around it, so to try to erase it from history is not only impossible but dangerous. The citizens of Sevier county in *Child of God* and the Texas border town in *No Country for Old Men* try to participate in this erasure, and in the attempt, they create and/or perpetuate images of violence. By ignoring their own violent acts, the townspeople of Sevier create Lester Ballard. By seeing Chigurh as a “prophet of destruction,” the characters in this novel continue to allow Chigurh to exist. They are their consequence; the punishment for attempting to project a false meaning onto violence. Violence does not need to have meaning enforced onto it; it does not need to be understood. Blair claims McCarthy is using characters like Ballard “as a way to avoid acknowledging modern society’s systemic violence,” but it is the opposite (90). Through Ballard and Chigurh, McCarthy forces us to acknowledge the violence in society as well as the hypocrisy and danger of ignoring it, and the hypocrisy. Violence is not a concept we can decide to include in our lives or not; it is simply reality.

While *Child of God* and *No Country for Old Men* are two novels that strongly present the aforementioned warning, they are not McCarthy’s only novels that do this. In fact, the idea that projecting godlike figures into godless worlds or looking for meaning where there is none can be dangerous, occurs in almost all McCarthy novels. In his

second novel, *Outer Dark*, McCarthy includes the figures of the three dark, mystical men who seemingly stalk Culla throughout the novel. The figures appear almost supernatural in presence, and their motives are never truly defined. Throughout the novel, Culla is looking for his sister Rinthy who is searching for their child, a product of their incestuous relationship. In the end, Culla comes across the child and the three men, and even despite Culla's mild protests and their claims they have no need for the child, they cut the throat of the infant. These men perpetuate a similar idea as Chigurh. We never see their motivations; we never see any interiority. They never say why the baby must die or why they are hunting Culla and his child. The only options are that they are psychopathic or that they, like Chigurh, feel a need to right what they see is wrong; in this case, removing this incestuous being from reality. Additionally, these three riders, as Christopher Nelson states in his article, cause violence and evil to become "common" and "natural" (31) just as Anton Chigurh's actions are natural to himself. Eventually, by the end of the novel, the reader becomes familiarized with Chigurh's violence and actions in a way that challenges the idea Chigurh is a completely immoral character. If we come to expect Chigurh's actions, if we come to understand them and his moral code, it makes it that much harder to call him psychopathic.

Similarly, the symbol of the "prophet of destruction" we see in Chigurh can also be aptly applied to Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, two characters that are probably more similar than any other two characters in the McCarthy universe. The story presented in that novel is one of bloodshed, war, and destruction. The judge is a figure of mystery and illusion; he is seemingly endowed with knowledge, and much like Chigurh, appears to kill without mercy or empathy. The judge also seems to be an enactor of fate. When

the judge speaks to the kid in prison near the end of the novel, he tells him, “You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part...our animosities were formed and waiting before we two ever met.” (319). To the judge, the kid is going against fate and history itself. He had a responsibility to fulfill; he made choices that had to be followed through, and he failed to follow them to the end. To the judge, that is the highest offense of all. He is just that, a judge of fate, much like Chigurh who judges fate and delivers. However, the judge seems far more mythic than Chigurh. He is a character whose height allows him to loom over all else, who has no hair on his body, and who seemingly never gets injured. In direct contrast to Chigurh, McCarthy makes us doubt if the judge is even human at all. Regardless, the judge is presented as a character who posits himself literally as a god among men who can enact fate onto others. He is the god in a godless world.

While McCarthy constantly provides us with these dark, terrible, and violent figures who believe themselves part of a higher power, he also provides us with characters that he believes successfully move through a violent and godless world and hold on to humanity. When McCarthy gives us examples of the figures he believes are the most honorable in society in his works, none of them try to erase violence. Instead, they are the truest version of themselves they can be, helping others despite the violence of the world like blacksmith in *Child of God*, to whom an entire chapter is dedicated, who is willing to share the passion of his craft with Ballard, not only making him a weapon but teaching him the art behind it (70-74). This parallels other figures like the various people in *Outer Dark* who house Rinthy on her quest to find her child or the doctor in *The Crossing* who is willing to heal the injured Boyd without receiving payment. For

McCarthy, the purpose of being alive and surrounded by violence is not to save the world but to maintain a sense of goodness in an otherwise not good world. Like the father and son in *The Road*, these figures are “carrying the fire” (238). This fire is our semblance of humanity, the small acts of kindness that act as the small light in an otherwise dark and violent world. To McCarthy this ability to recognize that the world around us is not savable but still carry our humanity is the most honorable.

Through Ballard and Chigurh, both of these texts suggest that people try to create godlike figures in godless worlds in order to absolve themselves of violence and avoid blame. However, this process creates not an all-beneficent god, but rather demonic figures: a necrophilic killer and a sociopathic hitman. Ballard and Chigurh also engage in this false meaning-making; in fact, they kill people in part because they wish to create connection (Ballard) and meaning (Chigurh). However, the blame is just as much on the world around them as it is on them, and McCarthy’s critique is not of these two men but of how they got to the positions they are in based on the people that - as much as they like to ignore their culpability - put them there. In McCarthy’s screenplay *The Sunset Limited*, the character White says, “The bible is full of cautionary tales. All of literature, for that matter” (31-32). Ballard and Chigurh are McCarthy’s warnings; they exist as characters that create themselves or are created when we feel a need to create meaning where there is none. However, by also providing us with characters who are willing to love and help and care for all as if they are equals, McCarthy provides us with the way he hopes for us to live. There may be no god, and we should not try to be god – we are only human, and while we may be violent and terrible at times, we can also be good if we so wish.

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