

ISSN:0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Miserable and Scary Atmosphere of American Society in *No Country for Old Men*

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Abstract:

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* deals exclusively with the violence and bloodshed present in the West Texas, USA during the 1980's drug war. The paper deals with the changes in American society in the form of increase in criminal forces and the rampant violence created by these forces. The law and order is difficult to be enforced on the people who have turned out to be corrupt and greedy. Changing technology has also advanced the mind-set of criminals who comfortably deceive even the police forces. Human life is degrading and the older values have got no importance. The escape of Chigurh depicts him to be somewhat invincible and unconquerable. It also depicts the failure of law and its helplessness to provide justice to the innocents. Thus, the paper tries to figure out how Chigurh has created an undying atmosphere of terror and how the existing system of law and order has failed to curb this evil. The factors, including both societal and the personality disorders leading to this degradation are also dealt with.

Keywords: Violence, Drugs, Disorder, Psychopathy, Corruption, Money, Terror.

The novel *No Country for Old Men* is a brisk thriller, representing a cat-and-mouse game between its two main characters. Set in the bleak and violent region of West Texas, *No Country for Old Men* revolves around three characters: Llewelyn Moss, Anton Chigurh and Sheriff Bell. The novel deals explicitly with the living conditions in the urban areas which plays an important role in influencing the overall life of an individual. Struggle for survival is implied in the novel which is depicted through the life of two main characters that is Anton Chigurh and Llewelyn Moss. The novel was presented in the form of screen version by Coen Brothers in the year 2011. The Coens have a distinctive style that tends towards heightened narrative. Moss keeps running away from Chigurh all the way through the novel not knowing that he is being watched throughout and can't escape his fate. The story begins in a West Texas desert during the 1980's drug war. So, it's quite obvious that violence and destruction form an important part of the novel. The three main characters of the novel representing their core individualism have their own perception of life, moral codes and death.

Moss, who has worked as a sniper in the Vietnam war, has seen enough of bloodshed and loss of life during this period. It is perhaps due to this reason that he takes the risk of stealing the money of a failed drug deal. He is well aware of the impending danger and

knows that his life is not going to be the same after he takes away the money. The money has become so much important in the modern American society that people willingly take the risk over their life in order to get it, as is done by Moss. He knows that the people involved in the drug deal will be coming to search for the money and they will not spare him. "Beyond all this was the dead certainty that someone was going to come looking for the money. Maybe several someones"(19).

Sheriff Bell who has been feeling guilty due to his experiences in the World War II, has joined the police department with a goal of providing justice to the people. He wants to serve his people and make over his sense of guilt of having abandoned his men during the war. But his goal remains unaccomplished as the changing time has also changed the mindset of the criminals who now use more advanced means of misleading even the police force. Lamenting the modern materialistic life, he regrets the passing of older times when things used to be simple and not so complicated. Bell finds himself disabled in face of the irrevocable bloodshed and violence. As he says in the beginning of chapter viii in his interlude, "This country has not had an unsolved homicide in forty-one years. Now we got nine of em in one week. Will they be solved? I don't know"(216).

Anton Chigurh, who can, in a way be considered as the most important character of the novel, is himself a representative of ferocity and indiscriminate slaughter of humanity. He is a professional serial killer whose terror and vehemence dominates throughout the novel. Being a cold blooded murderer and a killing machine, he has no sympathy for his victims. Viciousness and turbulence forms an essential part of *No Country for Old Men*. Chigurh seems to be the personification of violence and bloodshed and has his own philosophy that justifies his deeds. His philosophy of life is quite in opposition to Sheriff Bell who is an elderly person and finds his soul being gambled by the evil of the society like Chigurh. Justifying his violent behaviour towards his victims, Chigurh considers his victims to be destined to die due to their previous actions and he is just doing his job. He thinks that each and every decision taken by people decides their fate and changes their lives. "Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this.... A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning" (259). It shows that Chigurh is believer in the acts committed by people early in their lives which leads them to what they are at the present situation. His rampant behaviour is prevalent throughout the novel and is depicted through the different acts of aggressiveness committed by him.

The prevailing conditions of the society in the form of corruption and greed can be held responsible to some extent about the misdemeanours of Chigurh. Robert Merton, a renowned sociologist believes that crime is more related to social factors than individual ones. Some people may not succeed using the socially acceptable ways due to the disorder in the society caused by corruption, greed, favouritism etc. Merton, in his book *Social Theory and Social Structure*, originally published in 1949, has talked about four types of reactions of an individual towards a societal goal and means to their achievement: conformity, innovation, ritualism and rebellion. As per Merton, much criminal behaviour can be described as innovative because the criminals accept the societal goals of achieving success and wealth but they innovate their own means of achieving these goals. Anton Chigurh as well as Llewelyn Moss can be included in innovative category as both of them are trying to gain wealth through illegitimate means. The prevalent disorder of society can be held responsible for their condition, but total blame cannot be laid upon the social conditions as August Aichorn, a renowned psychologist, in his book *Wayward Youth* (1935) says that most

people are exposed to stressful environment but all of them do not turn to violence. In the same book, Aichorn considers that stress produces crime in those who have a particular mental state known as 'Latent Delinquency'. Latent delinquency, as per Aichorn, results from inadequate childhood socialization and manifests itself in the need for immediate gratification, lack of empathy for others and inability to feel guilty. So, Chigurh can be said to be afflicted with latent delinquency due to his being emotionless, and without a feeling of guilt for his crimes. So, psychological factors like many others as offshoots of sociological factors also play a pivotal role in the triggering violent and deviant behaviour as depicted by McCarthy in this novel.

Some criminals are said to be psychopaths as the criminal activities they indulge in is the result of a defect in their personality. In his book *Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Interpret the So-called Psychopathic Personality* (1941), Harvey Chekey maintains that psychopaths are intelligent, self-centred, engage in irresponsive behaviour and antisocial acts. As is clear from the activities of Chigurh, most of these traits are present in him. He is intelligent but self-centred and indulges in anti-social acts making the term psychopath applicable on himself.

Various researches have proved that the crime rate in urban areas of U.S. is causing threatening effect to the local population. People are facing a lot of problems due to the rampant violence and destruction caused by these terrifying forces. In "City and Suburban Crime Trends in Metropolitan America", a research paper written by Elizabeth Kneebone and Steven Raphael, it is established that the combination of direct financial losses and the cost of pain and suffering among victims in U.S. amounts to nearly six per cent of Gross Domestic Product. In the same paper it is also expounded that the federal, state and local government criminal justice expenditures amounted to \$ 214 billion. Many people pay significant premiums like housing prices or commute costs to live in areas with lower chances of victimization. These threatening conditions have created a lot of turmoil in the life of people living in the threatened areas. This bitter truth about American society has been successfully presented by the author in the form of a microcosm of the macrocosm as the plot of the novel also shows similar conditions where between the revenge game of Moss and Chigurh, a number of innocent people are victimised. For example, the clerk of the hotel where Moss was staying, Carson Wells and also Carla Jean, wife of Moss become the victims at the hand of Chigurh even without doing him a direct harm.

There are many incidents of terror created by Chigurh in the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Chigurh kills a Deputy who has arrested him. He strangles the Deputy with his handcuffs, pulling him so hard that his carotid artery bursts and blood springs the wall. After he is done, Chigurh unlocks his handcuffs, takes away the Deputy's cruises and runs away. On the way he comes across a man driving Ford sedan and commands him to come out. The man mistakes him to be a police officer and readily obeys after which he gets killed by Chigurh who later takes away his car. His remarks to the dead man, "I just didnt want you to get blood on the car"(7), depicts hard-heartedness and callousness on the part of Chigurh who is truly concerned with only himself.

The novel is full of the occurrences of violence and bloodshed which create a exhilarating and fearsome atmosphere. The cat-and-mouse game between Chigurh and Moss is quite gripping and creates a lot of suspense throughout. Even in the interlude of Bell where he talks about the attack of drug dealers on the police station shows how much disintegration has been caused in the American society where law and order is difficult to be enforced. The

news about the couple who were torturing and killing elderly people is one of the most shocking events. There is no doubt that the whole atmosphere of the novel/movie is quiet turbulent, but most of these episodes are related to Chigurh. He never thinks twice before killing anybody and the best he can do for them is to toss a coin decide their life or death as is clear from the incident of the proprietor and Carla Jean. "Chigurh took a twenty-five cent piece from his pocket and flipped it.... He caught it and slapped it onto the back of his forearm.... 'Call it', he said"(55).

In fact, the 'prophet of destruction' mentioned to in the beginning interlude of Bell can be referred to Chigurh who is there causing the turmoil. He kills even when there is no strong reason as is clear from his killing of Wells who offers him to disclose the location of the money. But Chigurh is unwilling as he cannot spare Wells for having tried to help out Moss. "You think you won't close your eyes. But you will", said Chigurh to Wells (177). His decision of killing Carla Jean, Moss's wife is also based on his so called principles. He offers Moss to give him back the money if he wants to save his wife. As for Moss, he will kill him either ways, whether he gives back money or not. When Moss refuses to co-operate, he kills Clara Jean even when he has found the money and Moss is dead. He tells Carla that he has given 'word to her husband' so she must die. "Your husband... had the opportunity to remove you from the harm's way and he chose not to do so.... Otherwise I would not be here now"(256). To do her a favour, he asks her to call a coin toss which she unfortunately loses and hence her death is evident.

Chigurh, as the opponent of Moss has his own ways and rules of getting his work done. In the essay "A Chaotic and Dark Vitalism: A Case Study of Cormac McCarthy's Psychopaths and the Geology of Immorals", Sean Braun says, "Chigurh being a devout member of this new religion, believes (possibly due to his psychopathic trails) that an act of will can alter events that are leading to a more predictable path (i.e., one's death or arrest)." In fact, Chigurh is one of those aggressive youngsters who want to destroy the law and order of the society they live in in order to create their own means to carry out their ends. While describing Chigurh to Moss, Carson Wells tells him, "even if you went to him and gave him the money, he'd still kill you" (151). Again Wells says to Moss, "There's no one alive on this planet that's ever had a cross word with him. They're all dead.... He is a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (153). This description of Chigurh by Wells is enough to explain what kind of personality he is. To take away anybody's life is not a big deal for him and he will do so on the slightest provocation. He tells Wells about an incident at a cafe where a guy says something indecent to him. When that guy comes out of the cafe, Chigurh kills him instantly. It shows the harsh and unforgiving nature of Chigurh. Chigurh occurs throughout the novel as somewhat unfathomable, a haunting ghost whom nobody has seen but whose terror exists in the hearts of people. Even the man who was talking to Carson Wells about Chigurh refers to him as invincible, "the invincible Mr Chigurh (140)". Although, Wells denies it, it can be considered as a fact.

The whole atmosphere of *No Country for Old Men* is one of extreme brutality and massacre. People are corrupt and can take any risk for the sake of money as is clear from the people whom Moss bribes to get their help. Money has become the god of people and human life has got no value. Selfishness and enmity are prevalent in the society and nobody is ashamed of indulging in any crime for the sake of wealth. In this postmodern world, older values have got little importance and people like Sheriff Bell find it difficult to carry on. The family relations are also disintegrating and there is lack of communication. Unlike the

husband-wife relation between Bell and Loretta who are like companions and share each and everything to each other, the relationship of Moss and his wife is not that much cordial. Although they love and care for each other, Moss seldom gives any details to Carla. He even does not give her any detail about why they have to abandon their house and move somewhere else. “You don’t need to not know everything” (21), tells Moss to Carla when she enquires about the things he has brought with him.

The drug war of the 1980’s has caused much loss of life, property and a condition of lawlessness. The large amount of money involved in the drug deal has made the people inclined to criminal ways. Bell gives the example of a case where a plane was used for drug running on a makeshift running strip. The investigation fails as the dealers do not come back to take the plane showing the large amount of money being involved in the drug deal which makes the dealers to abandon even the plane. The hope of the people in the midst of crisis and disorder rests on the police and the rest of the department meant for defending the people against such critical situations. But these evil forces have got so much strong that it has become nearly impossible to curb them. People have lost their faith in the police department and the department itself is feeling helpless. The escape of Chigurh towards the end of the novel depicts that the law and order in this postmodern condition has become feeble in face of these violent forces arising.

The novel moves towards the end with a pathetic picture of Sheriff Bell who decides to retire from his service as he finds it difficult to continue his service in presence of such evil and inhuman forces which he is unable to curb. Benjamin Sexton and Thomas A. Carole in their essay “No Country for Old Men a Search for Masculinity in Later Life” provide an analysis of Bell saying, “As the lawman of Terrell County, Texas, for over 30 years, Bell has anchored his life in traditional values.... But with the arrival of Anton Chigurh a relentlessly violent, amoral mercenary Bell witnesses social turmoil and senseless violence that shatter his sense of purpose and force him to reflect upon the ultimate meaning of his life.” The arrival of Chigurh is quite challenging to Sheriff Bell who finds himself of no use to the people of his area. His vision of providing justice to the innocent people is left unfulfilled and he can foresee no hope of its accomplishment in future. His talk about his war experience where he abandoned his men but was given a medal by the department, shows how the war is romanticised in front of the masses. Bell recognises his powerlessness and ponders over the faults of criminal justice system. This cruelty and disorder has become a part of the society and the media is only full of the news of this kind. The situation will only worsen with the corruption of people and the money being involved.

So, the atmosphere of American society as portrayed in *No Country for Old Men* is really pathetic and gloomy with the people living in constant fear about the danger on their lives. The illegal killing and trafficking of drugs is on rise and the failure of the government to curb this menace is only encouraging such people to continue with their destruction. In this faithless world, kindness and love have got no significance; instead a person has to pay the cost for trying to show such feelings. Moss is killed himself when trying to save the young girl from the Mexican men who instead of honouring his surrender kill both of them. The description of Bell’s war experiences also shows that sentiments and loyalty are now left with little importance. Despite abandoning his men during the war, Bell is honoured with medals just to romanticise the concept of war before the common masses. By unravelling layer by layer the reality of American society which is otherwise romanticised, McCarthy proves the fact that the scope left for humanity is diminishing and the indiscriminate slaughter of the innocents is creating a terrifying picture. God seems to be having no place in the vicious

atmosphere depicted in the novel; particularly signifying symbolically the whole postmodern materialistic world and even if God's presence is felt, it seems only to bless the evil.

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