

English IV Honors

Summer Assignment 2021

Ms. McDonald

Novel: *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy

Assignment 1:

Prior to reading the novel, review the background and character information; it will help you with how the novel is set up.

Read the novel. The movie is similar, but it is different in many ways. If you just watch the movie, you will lose a lot of information and will not fair well on your assessments. As you read, look for way to tie the novel in with *The Road*, which you read junior year.

You will have a reading check quiz on the 2nd day back to school, and you will write an in-class essay during the first week back. You will not be given the prompt ahead of time, so you will need to know the novel. If you write about the movie, not the novel, you will not do well.

Additionally, we will discuss the novel upon returning to school, and you will have a test after discussion.

I ask that you wait to read the novel until close to the start of school so it is fresh in your mind.

Assignment 2:

After you read the novel, read the criticism from "Red Planet" and be ready to discuss the criticism and the novel in written form when you return to school.

If you have any questions, please email me at tmcDonald@covcath.org.

Background for *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy

- Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr., was born on July 20, 1933
- Born in Providence, Rhode Island, but when he was 4, his family moved to Knoxville, TN
- McCarthy legally changed his name from Charles to Cormac, which is the Gaelic equivalent of "son of Charles" because he wanted to adopt an old family nickname bestowed on his father, Charles, by his Irish aunts
- Cormac attended the University of Tennessee briefly before joining the Air Force, but he returned to UT to major in engineering and business administration; he never graduated
- While there, he published two short pieces of fiction and won the 1959–60 Ingram Merrill Award.
- In 1961, he married Lee Holleman, a poet and fellow student. They moved to Chicago, where he worked as an auto mechanic and began to write
- McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), won the William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel
- The year *The Orchard Keeper* was published, McCarthy divorced and sailed to Ireland with money he received from a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. There he met Anne DeLisle, a British pop singer–dancer who was working on the ship. They married in 1966, traveled extensively, and settled in an artist colony on the island of Ibiza, where he continued to write
- McCarthy went on to divorce and remarry another time and write several other novels: *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006) are his most recent
- Many critics find fault with McCarthy, arguing that his novels contain gratuitous violence and that his view is nihilistic; however, many agree that McCarthy's works are significant and challenge readers to confront the brutality of human existence

No Country for Old Men

- Setting: 1980 West Texas/Mexican border

Important characters:

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell

- Main protagonist-the story revolves around him
- He is an iconic WWII veteran who oversees the investigation and the trail of murders even as he struggles to face the magnitude of the crimes he is trying to solve-they are completely out of his wheelhouse.

- The parts of the chapters that are italicized are his memories that introduce each chapter and serve as part of the novel's narration-these are very important.
- Question: Is he a good sheriff? I am not asking if he is a good person.

Llewelyn Moss

- Secondary protagonist
- A welder who proclaims he is "retired."
- Vietnam War veteran
- He is in his 30s.
- Married to a 19-year-old named Carla Jean; they met at Walmart, where she was a cashier.
- Question: What do you think is his tragic flaw?

Anton Chigurh

- The main antagonist
- A psychopathic hitman
- Prone to extreme violence and philosophical musings
- He is in his 30s
- Question: Who and *what* is Chigurh?

Style of the novel

- There are periods of 1st person (Ed Tom Bell's stream of consciousness) and 3rd person omniscient (all knowing) narration
- Vernacular
 - Fosters verisimilitude (reality)
 - Explores the lives of rural Texas people
 - Conveys Bells authenticity and Moss's vulnerability
- "Muscular Prose"
 - Distinctly lean and spare approach to writing
 - Minimal use of punctuation marks (like *The Road*)
 - Coarse and undecorated language

RED PLANET

The sanguinary sublime of Cormac McCarthy.

by James Wood

JULY 25, 2005

To read Cormac McCarthy is to enter a climate of frustration: a good day is so mysteriously followed by a bad one. McCarthy is a colossally gifted writer, certainly one of the greatest observers of landscape. He is also one of the great hams of American prose, who delights in producing a histrionic rhetoric that brilliantly ventriloquizes the King James Bible, Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy, Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner.

There is intense disagreement about McCarthy's literary status, which his new novel, "No Country for Old Men" (Knopf; \$24.95), an unimportant, stripped-down thriller, will only aggravate. Some readers are alienated by his novels' punctual appointments with blood-soaked violence. ("No Country for Old Men" opens with a prisoner strangling a sheriff's deputy with the chain of his handcuffs.) Others think his work bombastic, pretentious, or claustrophobically male-locked: McCarthy has a tendency to omit half the human race from serious scrutiny.

. . . McCarthy is probably best known, though, for a rather different register, in which his prose opens its lungs and bellows majestically, in a concatenation of Melville and Faulkner (though McCarthy always sounds more antique, and thus antiquarian, than either of those admired predecessors). "Blood Meridian" is full of such writing, in which the ragged and sordid band of American scalp hunters and the avenging Indians are seen as Macbeth himself might have envisaged them in his blood-haunted soliloquies:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets . . . and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools.

On the strength of this kind of thing, Harold Bloom has called "Blood Meridian" one of the major aesthetic achievements of the age, and "a universal tragedy of blood." . . .

. . . Curiously, McCarthy's new novel has almost none of the battered ormolu that makes his earlier prose so distinctive. There is one hokey moment when a violent assassin named Anton Chigurh stands over a Mexican drug dealer and shoots him, "watching his own image degrade in that squandered world," and the reader anticipates a rising paragraph of ornate plaint. But McCarthy is continent here, which is in keeping with the spirit of the novel. Everything is tight, reduced, simple, and very violent. McCarthy's idea for the Border Trilogy (which comprises "All the Pretty Horses," "The Crossing," and "Cities of the Plain") began life as a film script, and "No Country for Old Men" has already been sold to the producer Scott Rudin, so perhaps it is easier to think of it as a script than as a novel. That is to say, the book gestures not toward any recognizable reality but merely toward the narrative codes already established by pulp thrillers and action films. The story is itself cinematically familiar. It is 1980, and a young man, Llewelyn Moss, is out antelope hunting in the Texas desert. He stumbles upon several bodies, three trucks, and a case full of money. He takes the money. We know that he is now a marked man; indeed, a killer named Anton Chigurh—it is he who opens the book by strangling the deputy—is on his trail. As in such tales, there must also be a wife who is told, without much explanation, to pack her bags ("Here's what's goin on, Carla Jean. You need to get your stuff packed and be ready to roll out of here come daylight"); another assassin, whose job is to kill

Chigurh and retrieve the money for another party; and, bringing up the rear, like a flailing old grampus, must be the police.

Other codes are studiously obeyed. There is a properly male attention to hardware: "a heavybarreled .270 on a '98 Mauser with a laminated stock"; "the shotgun was a twelve gauge Remington automatic with a plastic military stock and a parkerized finish"; "he unzipped the case and took out a stainless steel .357 revolver and went back to the bed"; "a Tec-9 with two extra magazines and a box and a half of shells." And there is a proper male reticence. Carla Jean to Llewelyn: "I thought you was dead." Llewelyn to Carla Jean: "Well I aint so dont go to slobberin.'" Throughout the book, the characters, if the word can be applied to these medallions of murder, fall into thought. But it turns out to be a briskly end-stopped affair: "He stood there thinking about that." "He sipped the wine and when the steak came he cut into it and chewed slowly and thought about his life." "He sat on the bed thinking things over. . . . He thought about a lot of things but the thing that stayed with him was that at some point he was going to have to quit running on luck." "I stood out there a long time and I thought about things." Here is Hemingway's influence, so popular in male American fiction, of both the pulpy and the highbrow kind. It recalls the language of "A Farewell to Arms": "He looked very dead. It was raining. I had liked him as well as anyone I ever knew." What appears to be thought is in fact suppressed thought, the mere ratification of male taciturnity. The attempt to stifle sentimentality—"He looked very dead"—itself comes to seem a sentimental mannerism. McCarthy has never been much interested in consciousness and once declared that as far as he was concerned Henry James wasn't literature. Alas, his new book, with its gleaming equipment of death, its mindless men and absent (but appropriately sentimentalized) women, its rigid, impacted prose, and its meaningless story, is perhaps the logical result of a literary hostility to Mind.

"No Country for Old Men" is, nevertheless, very gripping—it knocks the socks off, say, "The Ambassadors"—and can be read in a few idle hours. The writing is never uninteresting, and there are occasional glints of McCarthy's high talent. The dialogue, for instance, is often pungent and comic and unusual, so good that we can confidently expect the Hollywood version to excise it: "This whole thing is just hell in spectacles, aint it Sheriff." Chigurh carries with him a cattle gun, which can swiftly bore a two-and-a-half-inch hole in an unlucky victim's head. The sheriff realizes what Chigurh is using, and asks his deputy if he has ever been to a slaughterhouse and seen how they "kill the beef." He receives this marvellous reply: "They had a knocker straddled the chute and they'd let the beeves through one at a time and he'd knock em in the head with a maul. He done that all day." Speech has always been one of the glories of McCarthy's fiction. He listens hard to Tennessean or Texan diction, and then reproduces it phonetically, with great, hospitable skill. "Kin we hep ye?" asks one man of another in "The Orchard Keeper." In "Child of God," a witness remembers how he and a friend found Lester Ballard's hanged father:

Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. He [Lester Ballard] come in the store and told it like you'd tell it was rainin out. We went up there and walked in the barn and I seen his feet hangin. We just cut him down, let him fall in the floor. Just like cutting down meat. . . . The old man's eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker'n a chow dog's. Chigurh, the assassin with the cattle gun slung over his shoulder, is reminiscent of the anarchist "professor" in "The Secret Agent," who walks around London with a bomb attached to himself. Conrad's professor explains that, unlike the life-distracted detective who is trying to arrest him, he has the advantage of thinking only about one thing: death. Chigurh is similarly monomaniacal, an agent of death. To one of his victims he says, "But I'm not like you. I live a simple life." Late in the novel, Chigurh descends on poor Carla Jean. When she protests that she has done him no harm, and that he could spare her, he comes on all Attic: there is nothing that can change what has been preordained. He makes her call a coin toss; she loses the call. This, too, it seems, was fate: "Somewhere

you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? 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."

I suspect that McCarthy hopes this high-flown nonsense will rub a little dignity into the novel's spare textures. But what is exposed is the seriousness of Conrad's engagement with evil—a political seriousness, as well as a moral one—and the hollowness of McCarthy's, at least in this morally empty book. It is just not possible to exploit for entertainment the weightless codes of thrillerwriting as ruthlessly as McCarthy does here, and then hope to come down at the end with a tilt of the ethical scales.

McCarthy has said, in interviews, that there is "no such thing as life without bloodshed," and that the novelist's proper occupation is with death. His work gives eloquent witness to this vision. Lester Ballard, watching two hawks, reflects that "he did not know how hawks mated but he knew that all things fought." Judge Holden, in "Blood Meridian," proclaims that war endures "because young men love it and old men love it in them." The Duena Alfonsa in "All the Pretty Horses" announces that "what is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change." McCarthy risks being accused of appearing to relish the violence he so lavishly records; this is the fate of the stylist who stoops to gore, and it seems an unfair complaint (though one never feels, as one always does in Dostoyevsky, the novelist flinching from the suffering he is recording). The problem with a novel like "No Country for Old Men" is that it cannot give violence any depth, context, or even reality. The artificial theatre of the writing makes the violence routine and showy. And McCarthy's idea—his novelistic picture—of life's evil is limited, and literal: it is only ever of physical violence. Though one wouldn't want to turn McCarthy into Henry James, there are surely ways to use a novel to register the more impalpable forms of evil and violence as well as the palpable.

. . . The new novel, though lacking such theological soundings, flirts with the theological. Chigurh, with his implacable loyalty to death, is a kind of devil who has appropriated a God-like omniscience: "When I came into your life," he tells Carla Jean, "your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end." Chigurh, who gets Carla Jean to call a coin toss for her life, is a pale replication of Judge Holden, who similarly casts himself above moral reckoning and speaks an even more heightened language: "Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. . . . This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate." But McCarthy stifles the question of theodicy before it can really speak. His myth of eternal violence—his vision of men "invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them"—asserts, in effect, that rebellion is pointless because this is how it will always be. Instead of suffering, there is represented violence; instead of struggle, death; instead of lament, blood.

Characters who ought to have distinct ethical shapes are gathered by this mythicizing into one bearish embrace, wherein the American mercenaries merge with the bellowing Indians and with the satanic Judge Holden, and Lester Ballard merges with the fighting hawks. Llewelyn Moss, the hunted, ought not to resemble Anton Chigurh, the hunter, but the flattening effect of the plot makes them essentially indistinguishable. The reader, of course, sides with the hunted. But both have been made unfree by the fake determinism of the thriller: "By the time [Moss] got up he knew that he was probably going to have to kill somebody. He just didn't know who it was." When Chigurh tells the blameless Carla Jean that "the shape of your path was visible from the beginning," most readers,

tutored in the rhetoric of pulp, will write it off as so much genre guff. But there is a way in which Chigurh is right: the thriller form knew all along that this was her end. It is the perfect vehicle for McCarthy's deterministic mythmaking, matching his metaphysical cheapness with a slickness unto death all its own.