

# The significance of violence in no country for old men



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The Significance of Violence in No Country for Old Men As is true with most of Cormac McCarthy's novels, No Country for Old Men is replete with scenes of violence. This novel, which is set in the chaotic and lawless borderland between Texas and Mexico, opens with the murder of a police officer by a psychopath criminal named Anton Chigurh. A bloody and failed drug deal immediately follows. Although McCarthy's descriptions of violence are numerous, the violence is not gratuitous. Rather, the scenes of violence serve literary purposes. Violence is used to create the menacing mood and dark setting of the novel, portray conflict between the novel's characters, and represent a changing world where evil threatens to destroy mankind's virtue and goodness.

Cormac McCarthy creates the novel's ominous mood and setting through his frequent use of violence. Texas, where the novel takes place, is historically known as the Wild West. Before Texas became a state, justice was administered by cowboys rather than courts. Similarly, the contemporary setting in which the novel takes place is also one of lawlessness but in a more modern sense. Drug dealers roam and the violence that often comes with illegal drug trading is always threatening. There is a hopeless, primitive feeling of a vast, barren land where men hunt each other. Early in the novel, the character of Llewellyn Moss is hunting deer when he stumbles upon a horrific scene of carnage where a drug deal had clearly been thwarted. Men and dogs are shot dead, cars are bullet ridden and there is blood everywhere. Moss finds a suitcase of money which he takes. The next day, drug dealers hunt him down. After a fiery gun battle and chase scene, Moss escapes. McCarthy's early descriptions of the empty landscape contribute to

a sinister mood and foreshadow violence: " Where he crested out the country lay dead flat, stretching away to the south and to the east. Red dirt and creosote. Mountains in the far and middle distance. Nothing out there. Heatshimmer." (pg. 26-27) This vast and ominously barren landscape provides the perfect stage upon which violence will erupt. There are no boundaries and there are no rules.

Other acts of violence are described early on by Sherriff Ed Tom Bell, which contribute to a mood and setting of a violent community. Sheriff Bell's first person narration, which precedes each chapter, reflects on the increase and nature of violent crime and describes acts directed at him. Just one example of Bell's concern about escalating violence is demonstrated in his statement that " the old boy opened up on me twice more and shot all the glass out of one side of the cruiser...point being you don't know what all you're stopping when you do stop somebody... you don't know what you're liable to find."(pg. 39) This is a country where the rules are not clearly defined and violence, as well as the threat of violence, are ever present. Violence propels the story forward and brings the main characters into conflict with each other. The novel is essentially a terrifying series of violent acts in which Anton Chigurh hunts and kills, at times for no clear purpose. The pivotal hunt of the novel is for Chigurh to retrieve the money Moss took and to also exact revenge " just for having inconvenienced him." (pg. 150) Chigurh would never be satisfied with only the money's return. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell foreshadows Chigurh's capacity for violence when he states early on, " somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don't want to confront him." (pg. 4) This description of Chigurh makes clear that

his violence towards others will be unrelenting. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell escapes that dangerous and deadly confrontation with Chigurh but sadly, Moss does not. Another character whose murder advances the final showdown between Chigurh and Moss is Carson Wells. Knowing that Chigurh is about to kill him, Wells states “ just do it. You goddamned psychopath. Do it and goddam you to hell... Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down the wall behind him.” (pg. 178) Because Chigurh has killed Wells, he is now one step closer to his primary objective of killing Moss. This violent showdown to come between the two main characters, Moss and Chigurh, represents the novel’s exploration of good versus evil.

McCarthy intends conflict between characters to mirror the struggle of good versus evil in mankind and the changing world. The older traditional world and the goodness of mankind are represented in Sheriff Bell. In fact, Sheriff Bell is arguably one of the “ Old Men” referred to in the novel’s title. He is also the narrator for ongoing reflections about the evil nature of man and how both man’s nature and morality are changing for the worse. Sheriff Bell is preoccupied with acts of violence that he feels are corrupting society. His concern is evident in his statement that “ because a lot of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I’m getting old...Nobody that can’t tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I’ve got.” (pg. 196) The sheriff uses an act of violence such as rape and murder and compares it to something as harmless as chewing gum. He does not do this to imply that he believes they are equally as bad, but to convey that crimes such as rape and

murder are becoming in a sense accepted or normal. The sheriff also reflects back on articles he has read in the newspaper to express his thoughts on how society has changed: “ It keeps getting harder... here the other day they was a woman put her baby in a trash compactor... my wife won't read the papers no more.” (pg. 40) It is clear that Sheriff Bell is disturbed and unable to process these changing times.

McCarthy's reliance on violence in *No Country for Old Men* creates an unforgettable morality tale. Although the horrific violence appears excessive and unnecessary at times, its frequent use advances the novel's plot and is central to its themes of good versus evil and the rapidly changing world. Man's progression towards evil and the changing world and values which seem confusing and inevitable to the old guard are underscored by the many violent events throughout the novel.