

Analysis of the brilliant adaptation of cormac mccarthy's novel no country for ol...

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The critically acclaimed thriller *No Country for Old Men*, authored by Cormac McCarthy and directed by brothers Ethan and Joel Coen, is as renowned in cinema as it is in literature—a rare and most refreshing circumstance. Both forms offer unique perspective in respect to their particular mediums; film and novel complement one another superbly. Upon thorough analysis of the two, one inevitably acquires greater insight and deeper appreciation for this exceptionally dramatic game of cat and mouse. Despite subtle adjustments to character development, *No Country for Old Men* is one of the most distinguished and exemplary adaptations in cinema as a result of directors Ethan and Joel Coen's artistic use of dramatic elements and thematic preservation of McCarthy's original masterpiece.

In rural West Texas, the year is 1980. Competent hunter and Vietnam War veteran, Llewelyn Moss, encounters the aftermath of a heroin exchange gone bad. Moss decides against contacting law enforcement and seizes an abandoned briefcase containing approximately two million dollars in cash. The countryboy is pursued by deranged gun for hire, Anton Chigurh, who will stop at nothing to neutralize his quarry. Left to contend with crime scenes and making sense of it all is Sheriff Ed Tom Bell who struggles to acknowledge the magnitude of the crimes he endeavors to impede. Readers and audiences are immersed in the conflict amongst the white knight of the desert domain, Satan's incarnate, and a capable survivalist somewhere in between.

The Coens adapted the thriller for motion picture audiences with the intention of further enhancing that which Cormac McCarthy had already

achieved in his readers; a sense of riveting brutality and chilled extremities. The film follows the story precisely with two exceptions, each concerning character development; one for the better, and the other for worse.

In the novel, Cormac McCarthy introduces an unnamed fifteen-year-old runaway desperate to accompany Llewelyn during his journey to El Paso. Moss informs the girl of the danger she could encounter in leading such a life but she appears to be as stubborn and self-sufficient as Llewelyn himself, an essential component to their brief friendship, no doubt. The unlikely companions flee their past on the road and entertain comedic rebuttals. Even the casual reader can infer that the hitchhiker sexually tempts her good samaritan from the moment he offers her a lift. In remaining faithful to his wife, Carla Jean, McCarthy establishes Moss' honor and dignity which had earlier appeared lacking. She and Llewelyn later share a drink outside their motel when the cartels take her hostage and, upon surrendering his weapon for her life, open fire on Moss and kill the pair in cold blood. Sheriff Bell and local authorities fail to assert the pair's true intentions and, in an even crueler twist of fate, Carla Jean is ultimately led to believe her husband had cheated on her with a minor.

Choosing to omit the hitchhiker is one of the few instances that the film failed to triumph the original. In the movie, the young runaway is replaced by an adult female who offers Moss a drink outside her motel pool. Little else is revealed before the audience is dealt a healthy dose of shock and awe when the frame cuts to a crime scene. Bell informs Carla Jean of her husband's demise and the story progresses. The Coens, whatever their intentions,

neglected a notable component to the tale. While certain parts need be discarded, the film could arguably have been all the more successful by including this thought-provoking event and additional layer of depth to Moss' complexity and character development.

In terms of the film, the Coens' depiction of Carla Jean is more sophisticated than McCarthy's. After burying her mother, she returns home and enters her living room to find Anton Chigurh at rest in her armchair. She insists that the situation is in the past and attempts to reason with her reaper with little success. Both versions portray Chigurh's single act of mercy in allowing her to call his coin toss for her life. Leading up to his request, the film's scene is extremely accurate to that which Cormac McCarthy devised with a minor twist: Carla Jean refuses to comply with Chigurh. In the novel, the exhausted gal is initially hesitant to participate but quickly gives in only to find it was not in her favor. The Coens took the opportunity to portray Llewelyn's wife as courageous and as stubborn as her husband. She finds the killer's demands laughable and is one of the few to ever question Chigurh in passionately retaliating, " I knowed you was crazy when I saw you sittin' there. I knowed exactly what was in store for me... no, I ain't gonna call it" (No Country for Old Men, 2007). Despite her inevitable demise being consistent, the film allotted her some degree of dignity.

It is most evident that the duo designed the screenplay with cinematic charisma while staying as true to the original work as humanly possible. With each scene in the film the Coens not only replicate the novel's intensity, but amplify it even more so with impeccable attention to detail. As is true with

any competent film adaptation, visual perspective offers the opportunity to provide the audience with sentiment and atmosphere unlike the literary medium's. In the film, the Coens go beyond doing the novel justice in this category; they successfully exploit it through dramatic elements such as creative settings and artfully unorthodox attributes.

In regards to setting, the film's cinematography elegantly projected McCarthy's poetic flare into an unforgettable atmosphere. A rather subtle foreshadowing visual is that of the impending storm. The weather's role is anything but vital to the plot. Nonetheless, the Coens incorporate a measure of barometric grim. When Llewelyn initially encounters the aftermath of the heroin negotiations, the previously peaceful setting sun is quickly obstructed by cloud cover and rolling thunder is audible as he returns to his vehicle with the briefcase. McCarthy undermines this decisive moment in simply remarking, "He raised his head and looked out across the bajada. A light wind from the North. Cool. Sunny" (Page 18).

A truly original and unconventional dramatic quality of the film is its absence of music. Most productions of this caliber are accompanied by a memorable score. In lacking a substantial soundtrack, viewers can better appreciate the brilliant performances it has to offer. Rather than implementing dramatic tones or otherwise unsubstantial musical ploys typical of Hollywood, emotion is thoroughly conveyed by raw tone of voice. Particularly Chigurh's dialogue, while disturbing in and of itself, is much more captivating without a distractingly dark background theme. Javier Bardem's deep and calculated vocals are instrumental to his character's ominous persona. An audience

subjected to a conversation involving the godless gun for hire needs nothing more than Bardem's maleficent resonance to convey a feeling of indescribable dread.

Both formats' inclusion of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell's monologues are of tremendous significance to the central theme: changing times and their inherent degradation of what once was and ought be. They provide incremental measures of humanity amongst chaos and senseless killing. Readers and audiences are subjected to an American society with a bloodlust for the easy fix. The seasoned sheriff knows all too well what's become of his jurisdiction as he reminisces of the "good old days" when manners and morality governed decent folk. With evolving circumstances come mutated specimens; it's monsters like Chigurh that unsettle old Ed Tom:

I don't know. I used to say they were the same ones we've always had to deal with. Same ones my granddaddy had to deal with. Back then they was rustlin' cattle. Now they're runnin' dope. But I don't know as that's true no more. I ain't sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I don't know what to do about 'em even. If you killed 'em all they'd have to build a annex on to hell. (Page 79)

The novel's fireside chats are much more frequent and set the mood for the chapters to follow. The film, being restricted to 122 minutes, decided upon an appropriate select few of the sheriff's interludes. Both open with Bell's eerie account of a teenage murderer and the ramifications he'd experienced

in seeing him executed. The tone is effectively established, however, the film is arguably superior in achieving thematic credibility. The Coens could not have possibly casted anyone more suitable for the role than Tommy Lee Jones. His vocal prowess, as gravely and hardened as the Texas terrain he traverses on horseback, creates a believable atmosphere of aged Western noir. The film includes just enough of these reflections on the country's decay and his inevitable retirement. Upon viewing the motion picture, it's nearly impossible to return to these narratives without reading them in Jones' all too authentic dialect.

Screenplay adaptations such as *No Country for Old Men* are a rarity and need be revered for having fulfilled the nearly futile task that is living up to their literary counterparts. Against all odds, the film format arguably surpassed McCarthy's near-biblical wild western. Its unprecedented success, regardless of minorly altered development of characters, is a product of its collectively artful cinematic elements and conservation of the novel's thematic integrity.