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The traditional narrative of Western films tells a story of good versus bad. There are ‘good guys,’ heroes like Marshall Will Kane in *High Noon* and Shane in *Shane*, who are courageous and ready to save the day from evildoers. There are ‘bad guys,’ villains like Jack Wilson in *Shane* and Coy LaHood in *Pale Rider*, who are driven by their own selfish desires for power, and who serve as moral counterparts to the heroes. These moral poles of good and bad provide

stability and order to traditional Westerns. With the dualism between good and bad implicit in the film, the narrative is able to interweave these components so that good always triumphs over bad. But this sort of moral framework is shattered in the Coen Brothers’ film *No Country for Old Men*, a pattern that is increasingly visible in modern popular culture in America.

Westerns have at least three central features: a hero, a villain and a narrative of confrontation between them. The hero is the morally good guy who always makes the right decision and always seems to save the day through his actions. In the film *Shane*, for example, Shane encounters a battle between a small community of homesteaders and the villainous cattle baron, Rufus Ryker. Shane saves the day by eventually confronting Ryker and his hired gun, Jack Wilson, killing both of them and ending the battle. We feel Shane did the right thing and saved the day, but what makes his actions moral?

There are at least two moral theories that can help us explain Shane’s heroism. One theory is *virtue-ethics*, a system of

ethics, that is concerned primarily with the acquisition of virtues such as courage and temperament. Following Aristotle, we can say that virtue is a state of character that involves the individual making a decision to act, where the correct decision leads to the action that

is the moderation, or “mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect.” For example, courage is a virtue in the sense that it is a character trait that is exemplified in action, where that action lies in between two extremes: the excess of courage (recklessness), and deficiency of courage (cowardice). Under this theory, Shane is courageous in his showdown with Ryker and Wilson. Even though he is outnumbered and risking his life, Shane is not reckless, since he is aware of his own abilities and the abilities of his enemies. By virtue-ethics, then,

Shane is the good guy of the film because he is a courageous hero.

Another moral theory is *deontological ethics*, most famously presented by Immanuel Kant. Deontology is a system of ethics which maintains that an action is considered to be good or bad in and of itself, without any appeal to the consequences or ends to which the action may lead. For Kant, an action is considered to be good so long as it conforms to, and is motivated by, our moral *duties*, or specific moral obligations, such as being honest, helping others in need, etc. Following Kant, Shane acts morally since he chooses to defend the homesteaders. His decision to fight is not only in accordance with his duty, but his motivation stems from his duty. In this sense, Shane is the moral hero insofar as he recognizes his moral duties, is motivated to follow such duties, and acts accordingly.

The second feature of Westerns is the villain, the bad guy who acts from selfish motivations and desires and can always be understood as acting immorally. We can see this exemplified in Shane’s counterparts, Ryker and Wilson. Ryker

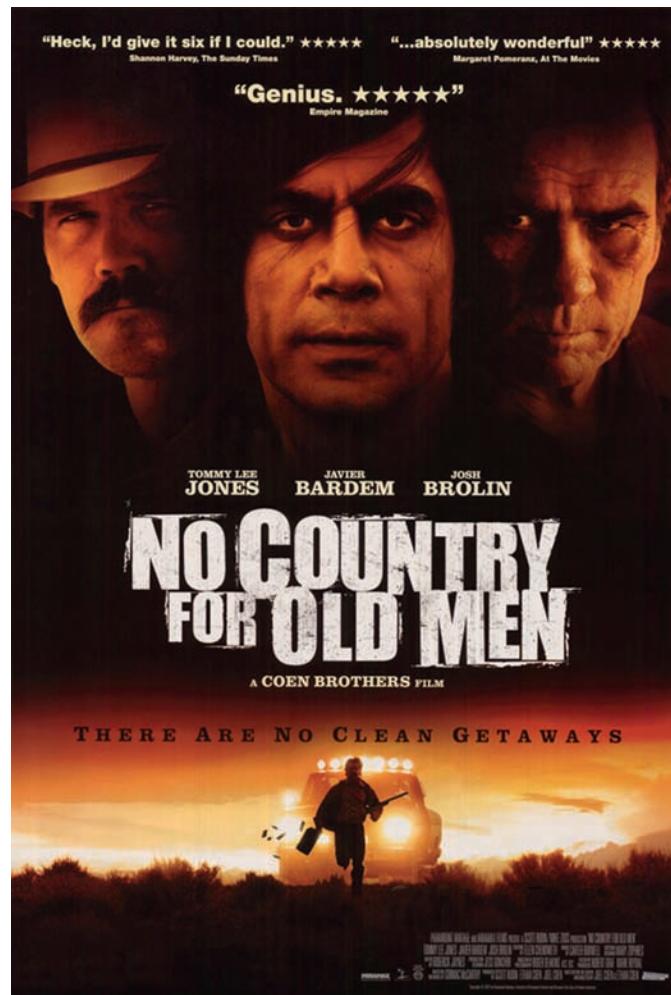


is the powerful businessman who acts with an unconditional drive for power. Meanwhile, Wilson is the cold-hearted gunslinger who is hired by Ryker to help drive out the homesteaders. Both are considered the villains of the film because we can understand their actions as immoral in the sense that they are rooted in self-interest. Ryker acts with a selfish desire for power, while Wilson acts out of a selfish desire for money and notoriety.

The third feature of Westerns is the narrative, where the confrontation between the hero and the villain, between good and bad, is played out. Westerns move forward on the force of a moral dilemma (such as the war between Ryker and the homesteaders), where the hero must determine how to respond to this dilemma (such as Shane's decision to fight the villains). There is usually an opportunity for the hero and the villain to meet, foreshadowing the ultimate showdown. Lastly, there is the final showdown between the hero and the villain, always leaving the villain dead and the hero triumphant. The hero must be able to save the day so that the moral dilemma is finally resolved and all is set right in the Western country.

No Country for Old Men is sharply different from the traditional Western. The hero of the film is Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. Like Shane, Kane and other traditional heroes of Westerns, Bell is a good guy. But it is now 1980, and times have changed in at least three ways. First, the western frontier is no longer characterized as the 'wild west,' where the land is unpopulated and unsettled and legal order is yet to be established. Second, though the 'wild west' has been 'tamed'

in one respect, it has also led to a new breed of lawlessness. The 'bad guys' now act irrationally and without criminal passion. Third, the hero of the west has grown old. Bell is no longer a young sheriff, ready and willing to act according to his moral duties and with courage. Instead, he is now weary and cautious.



We can see these changes unfold as the film follows the trail of the villain, Anton Chigurh. Bell initially looks like a traditional Western hero. He rides a horse, wears a white hat and seems he will do his duty as sheriff in fighting the bad guys. However, though his experience and wisdom are part of his heroic (and moral) qualities, they are also his downfall. Since Bell relies on his ability to know the villain, he is at a loss when he cannot understand Chigurh. The more Bell learns about Chigurh's 'methods'

(such as using a cattle gun to kill his victims), the more frightful he becomes. This fear is encapsulated when Bell returns to the El Paso Motel. Though Bell is courageous enough to enter the motel room (knowing that Chigurh could be in the room), there is no confrontation with Chigurh. Feeling "over-matched" and "discouraged," Bell retires.

He acknowledges that the country has changed, and though in his youth he had the moral integrity to be "willing to die" to perform his duty as sheriff, he finds now that he doesn't want to be part of this world.

So, Bell walks away. The hero has grown old and cannot make sense of his world. He cannot carry on with the same courage and proud dedication to his duties as did the heroes of the old Westerns. But this aging is not simply physical. It is also metaphorical and philosophical, with implications for the moral lessons of the Western genre. The world has changed so drastically that the hero of yesterday, whether it's Bell, Shane or Kane, can no longer survive in today's world.

Just as the hero has changed, so, too, has the villain. The traditional villain is immoral, and we hate him for acting that way. Nevertheless, we

can understand him as selfish, greedy and driven by money and power. Chigurh is no traditional villain. He does bad things, but we cannot understand why.

Another way Chigurh is different is the fact that he murders two of his associates, Carson Wells and his boss, characters in the film who play the parts of traditional villains. Wells is the hired gunslinger, and the 'boss' is the greedy business tycoon. These murders suggest another alteration of the villain. As Wells

suggests, Chigurh has “principles that transcend drugs and money” [i.e., the motives of the classic villain]. But these principles are twisted in the sense that he acts with moral consistency, but applies this consistency in horrible ways. For instance, upon killing his boss, Chigurh explains that the boss was wrong to hire more men than just Chigurh to look for the money. Another example occurs when he offers a deal to Llewelyn Moss. Chigurh tells Llewelyn that if he returns the money, Chigurh will kill only him, but not his wife, Carla Jean. Llewelyn refuses this offer and so Chigurh tracks down Carla Jean, and tells her that though he has no reason to hurt her, he *must* kill her, since he gave Llewelyn his word. These cases suggest that Chigurh does not act purely out of self-interest. He gains nothing from these murders. Further, Chigurh justifies his actions insofar as whether or not the actions are ‘good’ in themselves. Following Kant, he kills his boss on the principle that his boss made a wrong decision. Likewise, Chigurh kills Carla Jean only because he made a promise, and, as Kant would argue, we are morally obligated to keep our promises (whether we like it or not) because to do so is part of our moral duty. Chigurh’s deontological reasoning helps place him on a new level of immorality. To an extent, his actions are grounded on what appear to be moral principles, similar to the moral justifications made by the hero of the Western genre. But when the villain uses the hero’s line of reasoning, the polarity between good and bad weakens.

The distortion of the first two ingredients of the Western film, namely, the moral decay of the hero and the moral perplexity of the villain, contributes to the distortion of the third ingredient, the traditional narrative in the Western genre. *No Country for Old Men* shows the hero’s moral dilemma, but it occurs toward the end of the narrative. Having failed to save Llewelyn, and having

learned more about the villain, should Bell choose to have the final showdown with Chigurh? Ultimately, Bell declines to do so. Instead of giving himself the hero’s triumphant ride into the sunset, Bell retires and heads home. Thus, by failing to follow the hero’s path in the traditional Western framework, Bell’s decision violates the moral simplicity of the classic Western. It is not the case that good will always triumph over the bad.

By eliminating the three central ingredients of the Western film, *No Country for Old Men* shatters both the moral framework and the stability that Westerns have provided us. First, the moral framework is dismantled in the sense that the duality between the ideal good figure and the ideal bad figure has been erased. The hero is no longer a hero and the villain is now more horrible, more twisted, and more disturbing than ever. Second, the stability of the Western film collapses in the sense that we lose the order of the Western narrative that provides us with the happy ending where good triumphs over evil. In *No Country for Old Men*, without the final showdown between the hero and the villain, good cannot triumph. And so we see that the good either is killed (Llewelyn) or runs away (Bell).

But this doesn’t necessarily mean that bad triumphs over good. Though the deaths of bad guys like Wells and Chigurh’s boss seem to suggest that in the end bad wins, the film ultimately suggests something even worse: that what is good and what is bad are matters of chance. A number of deaths in the film, such as Carla Jean’s, are chance events or otherwise irrational. The western frontier has become nihilistic. According to nihilism, life and the world is meaningless because there is no inherent structure, stability, order or framework to it. As such, all the values that were once held to be significant are now seen as empty.

The country is “crazy” in the sense that it is irrational. Those who were once seen as good and heroic are now old and feeble, unable to uphold the standards of morality of the traditional Western genre. Meanwhile, the villains have become so maniacal and twisted as to render them incomprehensible. As such, the West becomes a world in which there is neither rhyme nor reason, and those inhabiting it are never held accountable. It has become a country without meaning and without any inherent value. The country, in short, has collapsed into nihilism.

No Country for Old Men illustrates how the morality of the traditional Western film is being challenged by a new, more nihilistic form. More generally, this pattern also appears in other media, such as television. Consider some popular television protagonists. On the one hand, there are heroes such as Tony Soprano (a character who, ironically, idolizes the Western hero Gary Cooper) and Omar Little (*The Wire*), who are strikingly similar to traditional Western villains who act out of self-interest and a drive for personal gain. On the other hand, there are heroes like Andy Sipowicz (*NYPD Blue*) and Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*) who do immoral things, albeit for morally good reasons. Such shows blur distinctions between good and bad, leaving a moral ambiguity and vagueness. If film and television are reflections of realities in our larger culture, then our country is possibly becoming not only “no country for old men,” but “no country for moral men” as well.

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