

Study Guide for *No Country for Old Men*

Cast

Tommy Lee Jones—Sheriff Ed Tom Bell
Javier Bardem—Anton Chigurh
Josh Brolin—Llewelyn Moss
Woody Harrelson—Carson Wells
Kelly Macdonald—Carla Jean Moss
Garret Dillahunt—Deputy Wendell
Tess Harper—Loretta Bell
Barry Corbin—Ellis
Stephen Root—Man who hires Wells

Rodger Boyce—Sheriff Roscoe Giddens
Beth Grant—Carla Jean's Mother
Ana Reeder—Poolside Woman
Kit Gwin—Sheriff Bell's Secretary
Zach Hopkins—Strangled Deputy
Chip Love—Man in Ford
Eduardo Antonio Garcia—'Agua' Man
Gene Jones—Gas Station Proprietor

Background

No Country for Old Men, released in theaters in 2007, was written and directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. The screenplay, based on the novel by Cormac McCarthy, is set in far West Texas in 1980, a time when the drug traffic from Mexico to the United States was increasing and bringing its violent effects to remote sections of the U. S. *No Country for Old Men*, like many of the Coen brothers' previous efforts, involves a plot gone horribly wrong as characters get caught up in situations beyond their control. From *Blood Simple* (1984), to *The Lady Killers* (2004), the Coens have made a unique mark on moviemaking, writing and directing films that are simultaneously tragic and comic.

The humor in *No Country for Old Men* is subtle but provides a badly needed break from an otherwise relentlessly violent and tense viewing experience. Consider, for instance, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell's explanation for why he doesn't draw a pistol after telling his deputy, Wendell, to draw his own gun upon entering a potential crime scene: "I'm hidin' behind you." When Wendell asks if the horrific multiple murder scene they are investigating is a mess, Bell says, "If it ain't, it'll do till the mess gets here." And when Wendell says of Bell's analysis of a situation, "That's very linear, Sheriff," Bell replies, "Well, age will flatten a man." Look for other examples of dry humor, and consider the effect.

One unusual technical aspect of the movie worth noting is minimal use of a musical score. A hint of music can be heard when Anton Chigurh is driven away in a squad car in the first scene, and later, when Chigurh tells the gas station proprietor the story of his lucky quarter, a faint strain of music creeps in. Given how often filmmakers use music to manipulate viewers' responses, it is a testament to just how powerful the acting, directing, and editing are that the Coen brothers opted not to take that route.

One challenge in watching the movie is keeping track of crucial plot developments. Simple actions, characterization, and motivation are often implied, leaving the audience to fill in crucial details on their own or to piece things together after the fact. Like any good film, *No Country for Old Men* requires multiple viewings, and it might help to display the subtitles the second time you watch it.

The title *No Country for Old Men* comes from the following poem by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). As you read the poem, consider how it adds to your understanding of the film. It helps to know that Byzantium is a legendary city of ancient Greece and that a central theme in the poem concerns the balance between human mortality and the desire to connect with eternity.

Sailing to Byzantium

THAT is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Discussion Questions for Seminar Paper and Midterm Exam

1. In addition to the way Sheriff Ed Tom Bell behaves in the movie, two passages of dialogue reveal the most about his character. In a voiceover narrative at the beginning of the film, Bell says, "The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure. It's not that I'm afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But, I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He'd have to say, 'O.K., I'll be part of this world.'"

One morning after resigning as sheriff, Bell describes to his wife Loretta his dreams from the previous night, both involving his dead father. In the first dream his father is supposed to meet Bell to give him some money he thinks he lost. Bell recounts the second dream as follows:

[I]t was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin' through [a mountain pass at] night. . . . It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin'. Never said nothin' goin' by. He just rode on past, and he had his blanket wrapped around him and his head down, and when he rode past, I seen he was carryin' fire in a horn the way people used to do, and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. 'Bout the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead, and he was fixin' to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.

Interpret Bell's opening monologue and his dreams in terms of what they illustrate about his character, his motivations for quitting as sheriff, and his subsequent feelings about doing so. What qualities define the code he lives by, and how does he differ from other law enforcement officers, including those depicted in the film--El Paso Sheriff Roscoe Giddens, Deputy Wendell, and his uncle Ellis (who was shot in the line of duty). In addition, how do you interpret Bell's going into Moss's El Paso motel room by himself after the shootout (the only time he draws a weapon in the film)? Does he suspect or come to believe Chigurh is in the room? (Aside from the brief shootout between Moss and Chigurh outside the Eagle Hotel, this is the only scene in which any of the three central characters come close to meeting face to face.

2. Besides Anton Chigurh, Llewelyn Moss may be the most mysterious character in the film. We get some insight into his character after he stumbles upon a drug deal gone bad and (after pursuing "the last man standing") takes the two million dollars left behind. And we can draw conclusions about his decision to return to the crime scene with a gallon of water for the one survivor he discovered. We also know that he served two tours of duty in Vietnam and that he seems devoted to his wife Carla Jean. What else of significance do we learn about Moss, and what kind of man is he? How adept is he at responding to situations, and how would you define the code he lives by?

3. Several characters question Anton Chigurh's sanity. At the Eagle Hotel, Carson Wells says to Chigurh, "Do you have any idea how . . . crazy you are?" and shortly before Chigurh kills Carla Jean Moss, she says to him, "I knowed you was crazy when I saw you sitting there." Only Sheriff Ed Tom Bell withholds such judgment, telling El Paso Sheriff Roscoe Giddens, "I'm not sure he's a lunatic," then adding, "[S]ometimes I think he's pretty much a ghost." What does Bell mean, and why does he see Chigurh so differently from the others? While it might be easier to dismiss Chigurh's multiple killings as the rampage of a madman, accepting Bell's view makes Chigurh's character more complex, intriguing, and frightening. Therefore, make the case that Chigurh is not insane. Consider the rules or principles he lives by as well as the unstated motivations for all of his actions, and take into account whom he kills and does not kill (and why). Not to muddy the water too much, but some critics interpret Chigurh as being Death itself, so feel free to address that assertion if you are so inclined.
4. Most of the film is set in sparsely populated far West Texas, and the Coen brothers carefully set up shots of the landscape, capturing its complex (and contradictory) qualities: beauty, danger, isolation, ruggedness, indifference. Several setup shots highlight the geography and its relation to its inhabitants. What is the relationship between character and setting? How are individuals molded by the place, and how is West Texas, along with its proximity to the Mexican border, an appropriate backdrop for the action that unfolds? It is worth noting that Anton Chigurh is the only outsider to the region, and try as he might to fit in (sporting a denim jacket and cowboy boots), he stands out, yet he ultimately proves to be "the last man standing," outlasting every adversary, collecting the two million dollars over which so many lives are lost, and dispensing his version of justice in taking Carla Jean Moss's life.
5. A prominent theme in the movie is the notion of fate versus chance. So much of what happens to characters pivots on happenstance, yet Anton Chigurh, for one, believes fate to be a ruling factor. He twice lets a coin toss determine whether someone lives or dies, first with the gas station proprietor and then with Carla Jean Moss, who refuses to go along. When she tells him, "I ain't gonna call it. . . . The coin don't have no say. It's just you," Chigurh replies, "I got here the same way the coin did." What does he mean, and how do you interpret the look on his face when he presses her, unsuccessfully, to call the coin toss? More broadly, how do you interpret the role of fate versus chance in the film? To what extent do the characters have control over what happens to them? Feel free to consider minor characters in your answer. (One ironic side note is that despite Chigurh's belief in fate, he becomes a victim of chance when, after leaving Carla Jean's house, a car runs a red light and crashes into his.)
6. Which characters are predominately Apollonian, and which ones are Dionysian? Who exhibits both tendencies? How do those tendencies help or hinder individual characters? Do some characters use their Apollonian or Dionysian sides as defense mechanisms? Do characters choose to be Apollonian or Dionysian?
7. One of Anton Chigurh's first lines in the film (spoken to the man he pulls over, then kills with a cattle gun) is "Would you hold still please?" and in the next scene Llewelyn Moss

says, to himself as much as to the antelope in his gunsight, "You hold still." The nearly identical dialogue serves to link Chigurh and Moss, and as the film progresses, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell says and behaves in ways that link him to the other two central characters. All three men become involved in pursuing one of the other two, taking on roles of hunter or hunted; an extension of this motif is the element of tracking, as each man follows a blood spoor, tire tracks, and signals from a transponder. All three men work (for the most part) alone, and all three operate according to his own code and clearly defined rules of conduct. Trace similarities between at least two of the men. What specific behaviors most clearly connect them, and what is the purpose is showing them to be similar? While it may be easier to draw similarities between Chigurh and Moss, don't overlook Bell. He and Chigurh, after all, are the only two of the three men who are in a room at the same time; even though no dialogue is spoken, there is an implied sense that each man is aware of the other's presence.

Your seminar paper will include the following citation information on the last (separate) page:

Works Cited

No Country for Old Men. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Perf. Tommy Lee Jones, Javier

Bardem, Josh Brolin, Woody Harrelson, and Kelly Macdonald. 2007. DVD. Miramax, 2008.