

“Just how dangerous is he?” Cormac McCarthy’s Hybridized Crime Fiction

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ABSTRACT

In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy draws on and incorporates genres into his narrative with the effect of expanding the overall possibilities of crime fiction, pushing the boundaries of what narrative structures it can include, and testing the limitations of hybridization. By contrasting three main characters of very different character types associated with very different genres, McCarthy creates the forward energy of the narrative, a characteristic of crime fiction, while presenting a complex and nuanced set of subtexts and motifs more common to literary fiction. Each genre in the narrative offers a different view of key elements of traditional crime fiction: death, knowledge, moral values, character choice, and narrative closure. At the same time, McCarthy disrupts the expectations of those genres, even while relying on various generic elements to heighten the tensions. McCarthy borrows heavily from genre techniques and tropes to expand and intensify his narrative. Genre elements enhance the effect of crime fiction’s notable inclusion of fear, death, and point of view without disrupting the elements of literary fiction. (MP)

KEYWORDS: postmodern crime fiction, crime genre, Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, hybrid fiction



In Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* (2005), thriller, horror, and western genres mix with other subgenres and generic tropes to create a richly blended and deeply layered example of crime fiction. This paper will not investigate whether the novel fits perfectly into the crime fiction genre, nor whether “crime fiction” might arguably be an umbrella term under which multiple genres and subgenres always fall. Nor will it take up the endless argument over the borderline between genre fiction and literary fiction. Instead, this paper will focus on how McCarthy draws on and incorporates genres into his narrative to expand the conception of how crime fiction works, what narrative structures it can include, and the strengths and limitations of hybridization. *No Country for Old Men* (hereafter

NCFOM) offers a particularly rich example of how literary fiction borrows from genre fiction to assimilate genre techniques into the broader thematic and moral aims of fiction in general.

David Bordwell argues in his final work, *Perplexing Plots*, that fiction categorized and marketed as literary fiction has, since at least the time of Charles Dickens, been greatly reliant on the conventions and techniques of works of genre fiction. He concludes succinctly by saying that “popular narrative can sponsor its own research projects” (411). He goes on to say that “[p]opular storytelling is, within self-imposed limits, an adventure in testing how artistic form and style can expand an art form and affect an audience” (412). Notably, for a final work from such a sharp and insightful film critic, Bordwell seems to be acknowledging that popular generic storytelling and high art literary storytelling share more similarities than differences. *NCFOM* is an excellent example of that argument, and in that sense is an experiment in the hybrid use of multiple genres.

Crime fiction can be singularly generic, but it rarely is. In terms of character, thematics, and structures, hybridization is more the rule than the exception, and multiplying genres amplifies intensity. What can also be seen in *NCFOM* is the way in which genres emerge into a hybridized form that obscures most, if not all, of the boundary issues between genre fiction and literary fiction. The genres blend and create a new combination that can be picked apart but functions as a unit. As Dan Sinykin notes in his study of the publishing industry and American Literature, *Big Fiction*, McCarthy manages to write “by absorbing genre techniques into literary fiction” (188), as many “literary” writers have done, but also in some ways he writes, “from within genre with the stylistic sophistication of literary fiction” (188). The cross-pollination works in both ways, and Sinykin goes on to assert that McCarthy not only “adopted genre techniques that would persist in his work” (121) but that his career can be seen as a “refuge from, and then participation in, the conglomerate era” (121). That is not to say McCarthy, much less crime fiction writers, aim at sales, but only that they adopt techniques that do not distract from engaging with a broader slice of readers.

In his final work, *Perplexing Plots*, Bordwell describes this cross-pollination between genres and forms of fiction as being

driven by the search for novelty, even within narrow bounds. The search often proceeds according to the variorum principle, the pressure to saturate the ecological niche with fine differences that are recognized by

fans. All genres court slight variation . . . and readers' awareness of nuances not just in setting and character but also in structure and narration. (396)

The term “variorum” fits well here, giving fuller insight into how the genres with which readers and film viewers are steeped in a variety of ways of reading. A novel like *NCFOM* would be more challenging to read and interpret if readers did not already have a facility with the wide variety of genres it incorporates. Bordwell argues for the importance of popular storytelling techniques and presents a helpful way of examining how genre becomes another site of exchange, with crime fiction being the very hub of that exchange.

I would argue further that this exchange is not just about setting, character, structure, and narration, as Bordwell points out, but also about thematics. The lack of such traditional crime fiction closure at the end of the novel pushes the reader to focus on the themes of American decline, the American drug trade, and American wars abroad. The more prominent theme of “crime” can emerge from the complex blend of genres because there is no sure reference to what crime is or what its resolution could be. By referencing the Vietnam War through the character of Moss, a Vietnam veteran, World War II through the character of Bell, a WWII veteran, and Chigurh, a central and current “soldier” in the war on drugs, perhaps, like drugs, a composite image of death emerges that has no resolution.

Of course, in most classic works of crime fiction, the “small” crimes also open up to the “large” crimes of society, history, and economic issues. Crime fiction can employ multiple genres and their attendant tropes, structures, and expectations to pull away the curtain to reveal the crimes evident in historical events, oppressive social conditions, and unfair economic hierarchies. Allen Josephs takes this longer view by arguing that in McCarthy’s works, “the specific focus on crime and evil has become strong enough that I have come to consider his novels like chapters in a very long book, all part and parcel of the same great story—about crime and about evil” (281).

In that sense, McCarthy’s novel works within the framework dilemmas of all crime fiction—juxtaposing the need to protect versus the need to punish, the need to know versus the fear of knowing, accepting the status quo or restoring it, and the hopelessness but continued hope of change for the better. McCarthy leaves us with an ambiguous conclusion in the dreams of Sheriff Bell. However, those dreams show that the mystery of

the human scramble for meanings of mind and body, of happenings and understanding, can enlighten us through the complex tensions and universal affiliations of crime fiction, a promise that all narrative extends, but crime fiction especially so.

Genre and point of view

McCarthy's *NCFOM* employs its generic conventions by rotating the narrative point of view through three characters: Chigurh, the antagonist; Bell, the protagonist; and Moss, a character lost between decision and indecision. Chigurh is allied to the horror genre, Bell to the Western genre, and Moss to the thriller genre. That is not to say they are limited to those conventions, but rather that the predominance of Western tropes for Bell, for example, provides the primary generic framing for his sections. The narrative remains, like most crime fiction, a combined set of narratives that overlap at distinct nodal points.

The novel rejects the typical or expected solution to the distance between the differently genred narratives, and indeed, the three main characters never meet. The tripartite braided narrative rotating between these three central characters and their accompanying tropes is a large part of what gives the novel its power even while denying the full resolution of most crime fiction. The way those three main genres combine and work—without fully integrating—under the broader umbrella of crime fiction is a large part of McCarthy's achievement. He uses the expectations and conventions of crime fiction, but he is not writing from within the full expectations of the crime fiction genre—instead, he uses its conventions to create tension between expectations and his own narrative structure.

This rotation is further complicated because Bell is a character in the narrative in two distinct ways: as an occasional first-person point of view and as a character acting in the events. His first-person, non-diegetic commentary serves as a Greek chorus commenting on the actions, even while in other sections, Bell plays an active role in events. He is both actant and commentator, which further blends the different genres and melds them into a style that aptly fits within the umbrella term of crime fiction. McCarthy keeps those two aspects of Bell's character entirely separate. Those two functions are further delineated by having Bell's first-person commentary entirely in italics and placed at the beginning of each chapter. The positioning emphasizes the separateness of the different genres embodied by the characters but also helps to blend them.

Jacques Derrida notes that the blending of genres is a characteristic of almost all texts:

Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text: there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and the generic mark. (230)

In other words, reading requires recognizing the genre and recognizing what is not the genre. That might be a simple task for some texts, but McCarthy employs a complex blend of genres, which are primarily expressed through the different points of view of the three main characters.

Genre is contained within the different points of view of the three main characters not so much structurally as effectually. Generic tropes and conventions accent and amplify the meanings created by the characters. To understand how the novel does that, it is easiest to examine the three primary characters one by one. This separate analysis brings to mind one of the essential components of crime fiction pointed out by Peter Hühn, who reminds us that “[t]he stories that are narrated in detective novels can profitably be described as stories of writing and reading insofar as they are concerned with authoring and deciphering ‘plots’” (451). Including multiple genres, especially the many different genres that McCarthy employs, complicates both of those endeavors. *NCFOM* seems to have three plots distributed among the three main characters.

The first character, Llewelyn Moss, acts in the narrative primarily through the thriller genre. A close variant of that genre, the action and anti-hero subgenres are also essential to his tripartite third of the novel. The events are set in action and established as thriller-like by Moss’s initial missed shot when hunting antelope. In his analysis of the philosophy of the Coen Brothers’ film adaptation of *NCFOM*, Richard Gilmore ties this missed shot to the term *hamartia*, the fatal flaw that forms a core element of Greek tragedy. Gilmore notes, “[h]amartia is a term derived from archery and literally means ‘off the mark’” (62). The chase, a standard trope in thrillers, begins and provides the primary tension in the novel as Moss shifts from hunter to hunted. The mixing of genres transposes to the visuals of the film just as thoroughly as in the original novel. That is, the Coen

brothers' adaptation employs hybridization just as masterfully as the novel; hybridization is essential to the story in both narrative forms.

Moss's genres also include the action genre. As the action hero, or more specifically, anti-hero, he is a savvy Vietnam veteran, skilled as a marksman and hunter, and has a clever (though not clever enough) approach to keeping the money he finds. The classic tropes of discovering dirty money, in this case, drug money, trying to keep it, and protecting a loved one, his wife, are the prime drivers of the plot. One bad shot at the antelope, plus his good tracking skills as a hunter, put him in the position of being on the run with two million dollars of drug money. Sheriff Bell speaks with Moss's wife in a moment of contemplation of what is essentially a Hitchcockian "McGuffin":

These people will kill him, Carla Jean. They won't quit.

He won't neither. He never has.

I wish I could say that was in his favor. But I have to say I don't think it is.

Well, she said, he's who he is and he always will be. That's why I married him. (McCarthy 127)

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell establishes his voice as the ethical center by pursuing Moss more as a protective Sheriff than an investigative detective. He is positioned as the detective with a procedural approach, but he often eschews or gives up on procedure. He has experience, character, and fearlessness, which fits Raymond Chandler's well-known description of the classic view of the genre-based character of the investigator:

But down these mean streets, a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (59)

In one sense, Bell's character fits that description quite neatly. In another sense, though, the character upends that classic definition by disrupting it with a nihilistic commentary. He primarily fits that definition of the classic detective not by ticking the boxes off on police procedural conventions but instead by adhering to the conventions of the Western genre. Nostalgia is

basic to the Western genre and Western themes that permeate *NCFOM*. They also decenter the temporal setting by bringing in reminiscences, in first person, of past sheriffs and of the land's importance to all who live there. Sheriff Bell adheres to the Western genre not only by riding horses, using a bolt action rifle, wearing a revolver, and engaging in shoot-outs. He carries the attitudes of the Western by inserting nostalgic comments such as "[t]his country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too" (McCarthy 284). When they talk, his uncle reminds him that "this country will kill you in a heartbeat, and still people love it" (284). The classic attitudes of the Western genre, the reverence for freedom, movement, and self-reliance, pervade the novel but never overtake the central crime fiction. The genres are blended carefully and complexly.

Thus, the character of Bell becomes central in the italicized passages written in first person from Bell's point of view. These first-person passages, inserted at the beginning of each of the thirteen chapters and the end of the novel, act as reflective, critical, and ethical commentary on the events. Bell is capable of seeing beyond the limitations of genre to the more significant meanings of what is transpiring as the drug trade changes America, leaving so many victims and so many crimes that he is ambivalent at best and despairing at worst about the hope of pursuing any of them. As the evil of those crimes is foregrounded throughout the novel, he notes that evil is encapsulated in a single man, the antagonist, Chigurh, whose name he does not even know. Bell describes the situation and the man in this way:

But there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it, and that's where this is goin. It had done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd of come to. Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don't want to confront him. I know he's real. (4)

Bell postpones his detective role of finding the killer through numerous delays, misdirections, and finally, by retiring. However, by embracing Chandler's ideal of "the detective hero" in thought, if not in action, he manages to at least offer insight into the nature of the bad guy and what he represents. In other words, Bell incorporates genres into the narrative but also blurs the lines to consider thematic problems more expansively. He follows the genre tropes in most of his actions but breaks them through his reflective commentary. He is less a detective than a sheriff. He does not solve crimes so much as protects the people in his

county. He expresses the conservative values of the Western, preserving safety, respecting the past, and maintaining the status quo. He never even meets, much less subdues, the “prophet of destruction,” Anton Chigurh.

“Antagonist” is perhaps not the correct description of Anton Chigurh’s role in the story, since he contributes much more than a foil against the other two main characters. The killings he commits all through the novel are brutal. The primary genres connected to Chigurh are horror and what could be considered a sub-genre of horror, that of monster. The horror genre is one that is expansive, but here focusing on the type of horror that involves a monster character is most fitting. The monster can be thought of as an especially powerful character, which often propels the narrative in horror stories, and one who acts particularly violently, unempathetically, and cruelly. The character of the monster, Chigurh, has supra-human qualities that inspire fear and terror in the reader, but also in the characters like Bell, who learn what he does. Moss refuses to see Chigurh’s monstrous actions for what they will bring—his own death. He also brings in elements of the gangster genre. It is interesting to note that horror is also essential to the kind of crime story created by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, where the murderer is led further into unstoppable, calculated actions of violence and cruelty. The horror genre seems to mirror the detective fiction, where the monster ranges freely or is never held to account. That is certainly the case with Chigurh, who seemingly cannot be contained. He is more than a criminal; his brutal crimes extend beyond the legal framework of much detective fiction.

However, McCarthy aims for something less human and more abstract than the typical Hitchcockian monster. He keeps Chigurh within the limits of realism as well. In one scene, the only person in the novel who has survived seeing Chigurh up to that point, Wells, is an investigator who more accurately fits the role of hired private detective. When asked by the drug kingpin who is hiring him, Wells says of Chigurh,

Nobody’s invincible.

Somebody is.

Why do you say that?

Somewhere in the world is the most invincible man. Just as somewhere is the most vulnerable.

That’s a belief that you have?

No. It’s called statistics. Just how dangerous is he?

Wells shrugged. Compared to what? The bubonic plague? He's bad enough that you called me. He's a psychopathic killer but so what? There's plenty of them around. (141)

McCarthy's strategy to incorporate genre dynamics and overcome genre limitations is evident in this exchange. Chigurh is discussed at several levels: killer, invincible man, bubonic plague, and in the imaginary timeframe of being the last man who survives everything and everyone. The extreme violence also contains generic implications. As Stephen Knight notes in his comprehensive book on two hundred years of crime fiction, "in the last two decades, some writers have made violence so central a feature of their texts that it appears to have taken on a generic force" (198). While extreme violence has always been an element of crime fiction and is essential to McCarthy's works, such as *Blood Meridian* (1985) or *Child of God* (1973), the hybridization of genres is again amplified by the generic violence. The mixing of horror into the crime fiction genre has a long history stretching back to the first writers who could be considered writing crime fiction: Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, and Wilkie Collins.

In a revealing scene, the depiction of Chigurh is given another generic twist when Chigurh performs surgery on himself, cleaning, stitching, and healing a bullet wound. That self-surgery recalls the creation of the Frankenstein monster, a body constructed from multiple bodies. He has a sort of analgesia that adds a further dimension of horror to his character and actions. In an insightful analysis of evil characters in films conducted by a team of psychiatrists, they gave Chigurh a diagnosis as, "active, primary, idiopathic psychopathy, incapacity for love, absence of shame or remorse, lack of psychological insight, inability to learn from past experience, cold-blooded attitude, ruthlessness, total determination, and lack of empathy. He seems to be affectively invulnerable and resistant to any form of emotion or humanity" (Leistedt and Linkowski 172). In short, he was viewed as one of the worst characters in fiction.

The film adaptation of *NCFOM* offers a compelling view of a complex human mind that seems to be transgressing the scientific designation "psychopath" and entering into the fictional designation "monster." Rather than remove or downplay the generic conventions McCarthy uses throughout his novel, the Coen brothers enhance those conventions and, one might argue, sharpen them through visual and cinematic techniques. The line between the two forms the tension between the realistic and fantasied aspects in both the film and the novel. Crime

fiction, at its most compelling, pushes toward that line in the major works of the genre.

With all these competing genres flooding the central crime narrative of a drug deal in the desert, the novel seems to exemplify Derrida's law of genre as "a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy, . . . a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set" (56). However, McCarthy uses tropes, conventions, and characters from multiple genres to expand and empower the central crime narrative. By creating a complex set of genre dynamics in the novel, tension is increased, suspense is enhanced, and the fear of consequences is deepened.

The primary tensions are those between the Western and detective genres on the one hand, and the horror and monster genres on the other. This divide creates the tension between the ratiocination of a detective solving a mystery and the horror of the physical reality of the crimes. Laura Marcus explains how this fundamental tension is essential in all detective stories. The connection she makes between the practice of the detective story and the structuralist theory is relevant to how hybridization works in all narratives, but particularly in narratives that rely on the tension between what is being told and how the narrative tells the story. Exploring the typology of detective fiction by referring to the work of Tzvetan Todorov, she claims that

the two orders of story, inquest, and crime, as equivalents to the Russian formalist distinction between *sjuzet* and *fabula* (often translated as "discourse" and "story" respectively) makes the detective story, as Peter Brooks writes, "the narrative of narratives," its classical structure a laying bare of the structure of all narrative in that it dramatizes the role of *sjuzet* and *fabula* and the nature of their relation. (245)

In that sense, McCarthy employs other genres to give weight to both the inquest and the crime, the mental deciphering and the symbolic display of bodily death. The genres are not added just for weight or complexity but to accentuate the tensions and deepen the thematic elements of the work. The interplay of genres creates tension and dynamism on top of the inherent tension between *sjuzet* and *fabula*, discourse, and story, which, as Marcus reminds us, remains one of the defining characteristics of crime fiction.

What is intriguing to note, as it might be left out of a strictly structuralist analysis of genre, is that McCarthy, like many classic crime

fiction authors, also includes a third element—commentary. Of course, it might be easiest to include commentary from detectives in the discourse/*sjuzet* side of the text. Indeed, it is one of the ways in which many authors expand the detecting narrative. However, McCarthy's marking of the first-person commentary from Bell as distinct from the discursive reconstruction of the crime and the story of interconnected events suggests that it stands apart as a different kind of structure, or rather as another distinct genre-based technique incorporated into the narrative. McCarthy takes the first-person narration, which is a classic technique in detective fiction, and tailors it to his own purposes. In *NCFOM*, the two-way pull of tensions in the narrative found in nearly all crime fiction becomes triangulated. The first-person voices of classic detectives serve the same function but are usually more fully integrated into the *sjuzet*/discourse. However, McCarthy removes the disembodied first-person narration from that central function and lets it stand on its own at the beginning of every chapter, and at the beginning and ending of the novel.

Genre and death

The other consequences of the hybrid use of multiple genres highlight other elements of crime fiction, particularly the issue of death as the theme and closure of the narrative. In *NCFOM*, the crime story side, with its focus on the bodily elements and the mental inquest, with its emphasis on the discovery and detection of the crime based on knowledge and character, is again inflected by genre. On the inquest side are the Western and detective genres, both of which have a coherent set of values, practical procedures, and desire for truth, as well as their own moral codes. All these are expressed in the sections from Bell's perspective. The genres of horror and monsters emphasizing transcendence, power, chance, and death are channeled through the character of Chigurh. Running through the middle of the two are the thriller and action genres aligned with Moss. Whichever of those narrative threads one chooses to emphasize, a very different thematic reading would result.

Those are not hard and fast divisions, as the monster figure of Chigurh, who gradually appears to be an incarnation or personification of death, has his principles. The erstwhile detective Bell says about Chigurh: "You cant make a deal with him . . . He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (McCarthy 153). However, those principles are far outside the other moral, ethical, legal, and extra-legal systems. Gilmore

states it clearly when he says that Chigurh's "function is to undo or to make irrelevant everyone's rules" (65). Since crime fiction explores the boundaries of rules, the novel fits into the crime fiction genre quite succinctly.

Chigurh pushes the boundaries of humanness, not only through his cruelty and seeming pleasure in looking into the eyes of those he has killed but by incorporating the aleatory in the scenes where he flips a coin to decide a potential victim's fate. Chigurh even carries a scythe-like tool, which has long been one of the images associated with traditional personifications of death, in the cattle punch he uses on several victims and to enter locked spaces. His metaphoric scythe allows him to transgress the boundaries of spaces, police offices, highways, homes, and office buildings, as well as the boundaries of bodies.

Different genres handle death differently, but by bringing in the monster genre, Chigurh focuses the narrative on death, with nearly too many deaths to count in the three-hundred-twenty-nine-page novel. Gill Plain eloquently analyzes this approach to death and the body in her *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, in the afterword to which, quoting Julia Kristeva, she notes that "[c]rime fiction depends upon an illusion: it categorically states that death can be confronted and explained. But such a premise is impossible. It assumes that the corpse, 'the ultimate in abjection' and a 'border that has encroached upon everything,' will know—and stay in—its place" (245). Chigurh not only transcends the borders to death; he revels in doing so, staring into the eyes of those he has killed. He is a serial killer who upends issues of safety by making the outside world seem to be a slaughterhouse by carrying a cattle gun wherever he goes. He establishes his meanings for death, as in this exchange with Wells, right before he kills the only man capable of tracking him down:

You think you're outside of everything, Wells said. But you're not.
Not everything. No.
You're not outside of death.
It doesn't mean to me what it does to you.
You think I'm afraid to die?
Yes. (177)

Most crime fiction is an exploration of the concept of death, but Chigurh, as an incarnation of death, serves to complicate the idea of death in myriad ways. Death appears as a random act of chance in the scenes where he tosses a coin to decide whether to kill a gas station attendant.

Death is presented as a promise when Chigurh talks to Moss's wife, Carla Jean, before killing her. After Carla Jean says, "[y]ou've no cause to hurt me" (255), Chigurh tells her, "I know. But I gave my word" (255). Death is presented as the act of a crazy person when Wells tells Chigurh, "[d]o you have any notion of how goddamned crazy you are?" (175) and Carla Jean responds, "I knowed you was crazy when I saw you sittin there" (257). Furthermore, death is presented as both a matter of choice and as a deterministic inevitability in the interchange between Wells and Chigurh: "We dont have to do this" (173). Carla Jean is also trying to convince him, "[y]ou don't have to do this" (257). Their last hope is that choice remains inside Chigurh. So, as the victims cling to the hope of choice, Chigurh falls into a more deterministic view of death when he explains the murder he is about to commit: "I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosin. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous" (259). Then, mocking even that view of death, he says, "[i]t was bad luck" (257). However one resolves these divergent views of death, and it seems difficult to do so, the novel enlarges the contemplation of death that permeates most crime fiction. Death is examined from multiple points of view, different in each genre, but without any unifying trope to give a coherent sense of uniform understanding. That inability to draw conclusions is part of the lack of closure, which is so disturbing in the novel.

Genre and fear

If it is true that, as John Truby argues in his comprehensive examination of story forms, *The Anatomy of Genres*, "[d]etective fiction highlights the brilliance of the mind while [h]orror emphasizes its flaws" (26), then *NCFOM* explores the epistemology of crime—the primary drive to know what happened and why. As the bodies pile up in the novel, so does curiosity. However, simple explanations are denied. As with death, the sheer number of possibilities refuses resolution. Through the character of Sheriff Bell, the push to find out is denied as the crime and its motivations are covered with larger metaphysical issues. Sheriff Bell says he could go and track down the killer, Chigurh, even though he thinks it will lead to his death, but he does not want to "put his soul at Hazard" (McCarthy 4). Bell contemplates what would be involved in learning about Chigurh, confronting him, and trying to capture him in the traditional manner, and he decides he will not attempt to do so. Bell notes, importantly, that it is not his fear of death that holds him back: "[i]t ain't just bein older. I wish that it

was. I cant say that it's even what you are willin to do. Because I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. . . . I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would" (4). Bell does not learn about the crime or the criminal, but he does learn about himself and his engagement with what he describes as "the true and living prophet of destruction" (4). It is here that hybridization includes an almost Biblical presentation of the stakes of engagement. Bell's decision is not that of a by-the-book detective, but rather of a character caught in the pressure of forces greater than what most detectives encounter. His decision to not go further after Chigurh is where the detective mystery genre is subverted. He does not push to know everything, but backs off to save his soul.

This push to know, an essential part of all crime fiction, has been elevated to the level of a test of one's soul. It is not just legal proof. Ironically, perhaps, for Bell, not knowing becomes a way of protecting himself. In traditional crime fiction, what a detective learns from cases often makes his character cynical, derisive, ironic, or misanthropic. That danger may be the ultimate end for all hard-boiled detectives, or at least it serves as a source of irony for detectives who preserve their essential, if not always cheery, nature despite the horrible things they have witnessed and learned. When Chigurh and Moss talk on the phone, Chigurh tells him very clearly what the ending will be. However, it is more than that; it is about acceptance, understanding, and the deeper issues of the human soul, just as it is for Bell.

It doesn't make any difference where they are.

So what are you goin up there for.

You know how this is going to turn out, don't you?

No. Do you?

Yes. I do. I think you do too. You just havent accepted it yet. (184)

Chigurh disrupts the drive toward knowing from knowing to the acceptance of what is known. In most crime novels there is a moment when discovery leads to disbelief and denial. That moment is then followed by a moment of acceptance and another of taking action.

In this way, McCarthy expands the relation between death and character and presents a set of three distinct approaches to this theme. Bell knows how the story will end, and Chigurh knows it too. It is only Moss

who does not know or he willfully refuses to accept what he knows and, as a result, he loses his life. That hard-boiled attitude gives the novel, as well as the film, a traditional crime fiction feeling.

The refusal to allow narrative closure makes that attitude even more hard-boiled. The novel disrupts crime and detective genres not simply by creating a hybrid of multiple genres but by projecting an attitude of fear that continues after the official inquest is closed without finding out who Chigurh actually was. Chigurh is hit by a car but walks away with his broken arm in a sling. We know from the scene where he doctors his own gunshot leg that he will survive this final violence against himself. The instability established by presenting various reasons for Chigurh's killing makes his walking away in the penultimate scene an explicit denial of closure. There is no Western showdown, no thriller final chase, no scene of a detective arresting the criminal, or even seeing them dead. The bad guy walks away.

The lack of a confrontation scene also denies closure. Moss has been killed, but Bell and Chigurh never even meet. Bell returns to the scene of Moss's death, but Chigurh stays out of the way and remains hidden. The scene is written by obscuring Chigurh's presence and it ends with Bell calling for backup. Chigurh remains, as the phrase has it, as silent as death. The ease with which he enters and exits spaces lingers, though, and Sheriff Bell does not even bother taking the investigation to the next step.

I tried to see if I could get his fingerprints off the FBI database but they just drew a blank. Wanted to know what his name was and what he'd done and all such as that. You end up lookin like a fool. He's a ghost. But he's out there. You wouldn't think it would be possible to just come and go thataway. I keep waiting to hear somethin else. Maybe I will yet. (248)

While the criminal gets away in some crime fiction, McCarthy has presented Chigurh as particularly transgressive. The lack of compensation for his trials, combined with the lack of moral resolution, leaves the narrative with the body's power in action over the mind's power of detection. In the most nihilistic way possible, the criminal succeeds, while the detective's inquest fails. The novel ends with the dream-like musings of Sheriff Bell, his retirement, and his voice as he searches for meaning and coherence up until the very end.

NCFOM can be categorized as postmodern crime fiction, where, as Stephen Knight argues, "coincidence, overlapping accounts, and indeterminacy are the plot motifs and parody, irony, and inconsequence are

technical tools to dislodge the idea of a single knowing and moralising subject” (195). *NCFOM* fits that postmodern categorization, but not perfectly. That subject, *NCFOM* suggests, can only be found in the overlap of a mixture of genres that reveal how that subject thinks, feels, and acts within the tensions and pressures of the story. In that sense, popular and literary storytelling both search for the concept of a subject with at least enough stability to offer a moralizing counterpoint to knowing the power of fear and death. Bell’s musing, moralizing, and nostalgizing the past show that something more than nihilism is possible, that perhaps all that remains after such violence is the known and moralizing subject.

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