

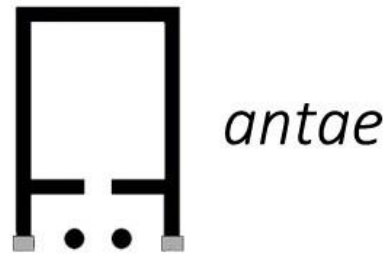
‘Some (Not So) New Kind’:

No Country for Old Men and Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction in Post-9/11 American Culture

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**‘Some (Not So) New Kind’:
No Country for Old Men and Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction in Post-9/11
American Culture**

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On the eve of what became the decade of Vietnam, C. Vann Woodward, in *The Burden of Southern History*, sought to qualify ‘the corollary of the uniquely American experience of abundance [with] the equally unique American experience of success’.¹ Woodward builds his argument by quoting Arthur Schlesinger Sr.’s attempt during World War II to define the American “national character” based upon ‘the profound conviction that nothing in the world is beyond its power to accomplish’. Exploring a contention that carried American exceptionalism through the end of the Cold War as well as, it seems reasonable to propose, the morning of September 11, 2001, Woodward summarises his colleague’s premise with the words ‘America is a success story’.²

While Woodward goes on to state that such unique triumphalism is akin to a ‘national habit of mind’, he posits that such an attitude is not universally shared across all portions of American life. ‘Success and victory’, he writes, ‘[are] but [two] among several legends in which the [American] South can participate only vicariously or in part’. Arguing for a unique heritage within the former Confederate states and, to a lesser extent, the Border areas that remained loyal to the Union, Woodward reflects that ‘unlike [its larger American counterpart], Southern history includes large components of frustration, failure and defeat’.³ In full:

It includes not only an overwhelming military defeat but long decades of defeat in the provinces of economic, social, and political life. Such a heritage affords the Southern people no basis for the delusion that there is nothing whatever beyond their power to accomplish. They have had it forcibly and repeatedly borne in upon them that this is not the case.⁴

Countering Schlesinger, then, Woodward insists upon a Southern difference from the remainder of American culture.⁵ In spite of beliefs coming from southern pulpits and politicians that secession was divinely sanctioned, the surrender at Appomattox brought a cataclysmic end to their political

¹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), pp. 18-19.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ On this, see also Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 9-10.

objectives set forth in 1861.⁶ As Eugene Genovese argues, while a notable majority of these Confederates may have rationalised their surrender as God's punishment for their lack of obedience of the divine will, they well understood the depths of their failure on the fields of military conflict.⁷ Woodward's historical summary, in fact, stresses how the nature of such regional capitulation remained alone in American history.⁸

After almost sixty years, Woodward's thesis remains intriguing, even as its exclusion of African Americans stands as a notable shortcoming. Instead of remaining strictly within the realm of military failure, which the United States endured in Vietnam following Woodward's declaration of white Southern distinctiveness, subsequent worries over national inadequacy have created questions concerning an American exceptionalism still rooted in perceived blessings from the divine.⁹ Historian James Patterson expresses the post-war American belief in the 'grand expectations' of stable cultural institutions that had literally helped save Western civilisation had become not even within thirty years so corroded that the American public had, by the middle 1970s, fallen into an intractable 'cynicism' about "the System" and the Washington Establishment long after the return of the living who had done the fighting.¹⁰

For the thirty years prior to the demise in Vietnam, however, Americans such as Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* lived and worked within the assumption that, due to our morally functioning and beneficial institutions, Americans could accomplish whatever they chose to do.¹¹ Despite notable ambiguities which arose with the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism, Patterson argues that 'the majority of the American people during the twenty-five or so years following the end of World War II developed ever-greater expectations about the capacity of the United States to create a better world abroad and a happier society at home'.¹² Even through the 'turbulent decade' of the 1960s and the bursting forth of a "rights-consciousness" revolution, most Americans continued to maintain "traditional ideas" such as 'faith in the value of hard work, belief in self-help and individualism, [and] conservative religious values'.¹³ Guided by these principles following his return from the European combat theatre and the whole of his adult

⁶ See also Eugene Genovese, *The Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White South* (Athens, GA and London, England: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 1-5, 88, 127; James M. McPherson, *This Mighty Scourge Perspectives on the Civil War* (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 3-5; and Alan T. Nolan, 'The Anatomy of the Myth', in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, ed. by Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 11-34, p. 19-21.

⁷ See Genovese, p. 12.

⁸ Woodward, p. 19.

⁹ On this, see Erika B. Spoden, 'Let There Be Blood: The Vein of Vietnam in "No Country for Old Men"', *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 10(1), (2012), 76-92, p. 86; and Forrest G. Robinson, 'Everything's Interesting: Cormac McCarthy and the Construction of Reality', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70(3), (2014), 87-127, p. 109.

¹⁰ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York, NY, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 769-770.

¹¹ See Patterson, p. 8, and Lisle A. Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1999), pp. 1-6, 10-11.

¹² Patterson, p. vii. Cf. Rose, pp. 2-6.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.

lifetime as he served while protecting into the late 1970s, Sheriff Bell had by those years begun to grapple with other, more inexplicable, concerns that, in his own words, were so devoid of even an immoral framework as to ‘put [his] soul at hazard’.¹⁴

These concerns are explored through a dawning awareness that occurs while Bell pursues the mass murderer Anton Chigurh. Feeling a gnawing sense of moral dilemma, Bell’s italicised thoughts within the novel reflect how it now seems virtually impossible to maintain any sort of ethical boundaries while still performing his duty to enforce the law. McCarthy presents Bell still managing to do so within his decision to embrace a very un-American type of failure. Such an embracing, at the same time, was one with which Bell’s ancestors from Georgia almost certainly had a good deal of familiarity.¹⁵ Through coming to accept his failures against Chigurh and, by doing so, not putting ‘[his] soul at hazard’, I will argue that McCarthy posits Bell as actually succeeding. By choosing to take early retirement even as his adversary remains at large, Bell’s failure to capture Chigurh expresses the biblically-based paradox of winning by losing.¹⁶

Through its cultural exploration rooted in Bell’s paradox, McCarthy presents a means by which American society in the post 9-11 era can continue, as Francisco Collado-Rodriguez argues, to ‘offer an understanding of the individual self and our civilization as structurally traumatized, with the implication that some moral issues should be reconsidered if the human species is to survive’.¹⁷ Even beyond the events of September 11, 2001, such an inference further frames McCarthy’s narrative, along with his subsequent works *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*, as ways through which it becomes possible to reconstruct an agreed upon and functioning moral order.¹⁸

It is noteworthy that, in the same era as *No Country*, there are two other novels that express the same desire for some type of renewed cultural morality. Through *The Hunger Games*, the first of Suzanne Collins’s fictional trilogy set in the dystopian Panem, there is explored the manner in which political revolution reinvents itself through a reclaiming of individual dignity rooted in personal sacrifice. The manner by which the revolution is ignited, as Katniss Everdeen ‘volunteer[s] as tribute’ (to save her sister Prim from certain death in a nationally televised gladiatorial struggle)¹⁹ explicitly reclaims the notion of morality in some form as a necessary component ‘if the human species is to survive’.²⁰

¹⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2005), p. 5. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*NC*, page number). Italics will be as in original unless otherwise stated. Cf. *NC*, 56, 272-80.

¹⁵ See *NC*, 123.

¹⁶ See *NC*, 245. ‘For whoever would save his [or her] life will lose it; and whoever loses his [or her] life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it’. Mark 8:35.

¹⁷ Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, ‘Trauma and Storytelling in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*’, *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Literature*, 48, (2012), 45-69, p. 46.

¹⁸ See Erik Wielenberg, ‘God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*’, *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 8(1), (2012), 1-19.

¹⁹ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2008), p. 22.

²⁰ Collado-Rodriguez, p. 46.

Four years subsequent, Rilla Askew's *Kind of Kin*, set in the southeastern portion of America's Oklahoma, historicises the consequences of HB1804, a 2008 state law that creates strict penalties for any Oklahoma citizen 'to knowingly transport illegal immigrants, creates state barriers to hiring illegal immigrants and requires proof of citizenship before one can get certain government benefits'.²¹ Originating with the arrest of Bob Brown, 'a real religious [Christian] man' who, as an expression of his faith, deliberately violates the state law to harbour undocumented Hispanic immigrants in his barn, the climactic sequence evolves upon Brown's daughter, Georgia "Sweet" Kirkendall, and her attempts to hide the family of her half-sister, which includes her undocumented brother-in-law as well as her infant niece, within the First Baptist Church of her small hometown of Cedar. These efforts occur even as tense confrontations between organisations embodying current American political polarities take place on Cedar's main street right outside the church's door.²² Escalating at the moment when 'four elderly Women's Missionary Union ladies' used 'bald-face lie[s]' with Sheriff Arvin Holloway so as to protect Sweet's family from arrest, Askew's novel reasserts the stability within a principled centre that honours the same type of personal dignity within both *No Country* and *The Hunger Games*.²³

Centred in a desire to reassert the need for a functioning morality through the midst of cultural fear and upheaval, McCarthy, Collins, and Askew each imply the ongoing uncertainties within American life after the events of September 11, 2001. Beyond those immediate circumstances, however, remain the ambiguities that began their ascent in the aftermath, as *No Country* narrates during the visit of Sheriff Bell with his Uncle Ellis, of not simply Vietnam but even World War II.²⁴ Such ambiguities, in turn, portray failure in the manner that Woodward argues is unique to the American white South following Appomattox.²⁵ Despite American victory in World War II, the Sheriff comes to realise that such hegemonic certainty provides only an illusion of permanence; from that context, he realises that some battles might be won, but only through entering choices of great moral consequence. As Bell puts it, 'I wont do that' (*NC*, 4).

Sheriff Bell opens the novel with reference to the dilemma that had been building within him over the past several years by describing the only case of his career in which he had sent a convicted felon 'to the gaschamber at Huntsville'. Describing the felon as a nineteen-year-old who 'had been planning to kill somebody for as long as he could remember', Bell notes how the young man, if somehow granted release, bluntly says that 'he'd do it again'. Going still further, the Sheriff mentions that this unnamed killer expresses how 'he knew he was goin to be in hell in fifteen minutes', and, pondering the implications, Bell 'got to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind'. Despite having nearly three decades in law enforcement following his return from World War II,

²¹ See Bill Braun, 'HB 1804 ruling remains in Limbo', *Tulsa World*, (27 December 2008). <https://www.tulsaworld.com/news/courts/hb-ruling-remains-in-limbo/article_015395b5-a670-5c3c-9695-9989a45829e0.html>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].

²² Rilla Askew, *Kind of Kin* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2012), pp. 331-365.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 365.

²⁴ See *NC*, 276-278.

²⁵ Woodward, p. 19.

such a realisation leaves Bell speechless in the face of ‘a man who by his own admission has no soul’.²⁶ At the same time, Bell relates how even such a level of cold indifference pales in comparison to ‘what was comin down the pike’ (NC, 3-4).

In commenting upon what soon took place thereafter, Bell uses West Texas-rooted metaphors through the broader context of an American evangelical Protestantism that has cultural links with the early Nineteenth Century. Writing that ‘[t]hey say the eyes are the windows to the soul’ without specifying the identity of “they”, Bell notes that after his encounter with Chigurh, he did not want to ‘know what them eyes was windows to’ (NC, 4). Indicating with even greater revulsion that he had once thought possible, Bell reflects that

there is another view of the world and other eyes to see it and that’s where this is goin. ... Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don’t want to confront him. I know he’s real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once and I won’t do it again (NC, 4).

Clarifying that his premature retirement does not relate to advancing age, Sheriff Bell explains that he had known the dangers of law enforcement from his earliest days on the job. Conversely, Bell makes clear that an early departure from his life’s work rested solely on an awareness of ‘what [he was] willin to become’ to capture Chigurh. ‘I think’, Bell reflects, ‘a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that’. Despite witnessing men dying in combat and having seen the ever-increasing brutality of crime over his years as a county sheriff, Bell knows that to apprehend Chigurh, in terms of the evangelical Protestantism which he knew at least by tradition, he would have to sacrifice his eternal essence to do so (NC, 3-4).²⁷

While Bell does not mention a specific church affiliation, his use of biblical language portrays an awareness of its tropes and images. In so doing, Bell accepts the ongoing importance of evangelical Protestantism that had shaped much of American cultural life from roughly 1810 well into his lifetime.²⁸ As specified by historian Mark Noll in *The Civil War as Theological Crisis*, evangelical Protestants ‘of a British background [...] exalted the Bible instead of tradition or clerical elites as the basic religious authority’, and furthermore ‘were skeptical about received religious authority, emphasized both the activity of grace in their lives and the need for lives of gracious activity, practiced discipline of self and others, [...] [and] were culturally adaptive’.²⁹ While these same Protestants stressed, through their reading of the Bible, the reality of human fracture in sin, they also emphasised the possibility that even the worst offender could be redeemed by God’s grace. Despite his lengthy service on the front lines of law enforcement and having certainly known

²⁶ See NC, 240.

²⁷ See NC, 277.

²⁸ On this, see Martin Marty, *Pilgrims in their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1984), pp. 297-301, and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 11.

²⁹ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 17-18.

scores of criminals within the American legal system, Bell's worldview is still based, as he suggests, upon those evangelically redemptive assumptions.³⁰ For Bell to encounter in immediate succession, however, a teenager who professes to lack a soul and a mass killing machine with no discernible motive, such an epiphany becomes almost too overwhelming to comprehend. While Bell's story, it seems, evolves toward at least a cognitive understanding of the young killer that he helped bring to justice, he lacks even the most basic means of either a language or worldview to grapple with what might be labelled as the negative life-force known as Anton Chigurh.³¹

While critics of *No Country* (and McCarthy's *oeuvre*) have concentrated on how his fiction explores existential and ontological matters, none appear to have linked Bell's experiences in the Second World War, his growing sense of failure with Chigurh, and their respective connections to his Georgia ancestors after the Civil War.³² More specifically, the cultural juxtapositions of Sheriff Bell's youthful service in the military and his vocational status as an officer sworn to enforce the law, coupled with his inability to capture Anton Chigurh by working within these same institutions, create a deepening sense of dread toward, as he put it, the state of his soul. Conjoined to such dread, Sheriff Bell's Southern background nonetheless enables him to recognise the option of admitting failure rather than falling into an irredeemable moral risk. From his background as a Caucasian evangelical Protestant with Southern roots, Sheriff Bell is able, by leaving the field to someone whose amorality is so profound as to make a 19-year-old murderer with 'no soul' seem enlightened, to transform his cultural failure into a moral success.³³ These signifiers of winning by losing, as they helped to form the sheriff's conduct during his chase of Chigurh, provide an additional means by which to explore American exceptionalism in the post 9-11 era, and indeed Patterson expresses the assumptions that guided Bell's sense of purpose as a military man in the fight against Nazism.³⁴ Believing that "we are all in this together", Bell serves while being guided by a basic trust in the public order that he understands as an expression of the evangelical Protestantism which equated being Christian and American as one and the same. Woodward notes, however, that belief in such divinely sanctioned uniqueness did not always run universally from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and, as McCarthy establishes, expressed only a small voice across the world amongst the bursting cacophony of post-war American political, economic, and military hegemony.

By posing an alternative vision to American exceptionalism, Woodward establishes a framework that fits well within McCarthy's thematic approach to his first work of fiction in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Through the prism of white Southern 'frustration and defeat', *No Country* can be read with Chigurh representing an embodiment of a discourse that the rest of the world accepted as a matter of course.³⁵ Rather than 'some new kind' of murdering chaos loosed upon the

³⁰ See *NC*, 4, 309.

³¹ See *NC*, 4, 46-47.

³² See *NC*, 240. Cf. Robinson, p. 88.

³³ See *NC*, 3-5. Cf. Noll, pp. 17-18.

³⁴ Patterson, p. 8.

³⁵ Woodward, p. 19.

world, Bell's encounter with Chigurh suggests, in Lydia Cooper's terms, simply the ongoing manifestation of a psychopathic killing machine devoid of even the notion of an existing morality.³⁶ By contrast, Sheriff Bell's initial unawareness of Chigurh's chaotic indifference portrays a larger American failure to understand its destiny within what he almost certainly believed was the "American Century". Writing and historicising his novel against the backdrop of institutional failures to prevent the attacks of terror on the proclamations of the American self-understanding, McCarthy portrays a cultural and historical tension between Bell's combat in World War II and the cataclysm that had reshaped the lives of his ancestors between 1861 and 1865.³⁷ Rather than reinforcing "American innocence" or exceptionalism, Bell's series of failures during his search for Chigurh, and the consequences that led to the violent deaths, among others, of Llewelyn and Carla Jean Moss, echo those of his Georgia ancestors who perhaps came to Texas with the taste of defeat in their mouths.³⁸ Those nineteenth century Bells consequently may have kept so silent across their first years after their arrival that their law-enforcing descendant 'never could find out what any of them did believe', but Ed Tom Bell had long known that his Georgia family did not choose freely to leave their roots (*NC*, 124). In the aftermath of April 9, 1865, they had escaped from them by all possible haste.³⁹

Despite a lifetime spent in the Texas of the twentieth century, Sheriff Bell lives on assumptions more rooted in the years of its immediate predecessor.⁴⁰ These underpinnings carry him into battle, and, as he explains to his Uncle Ellis, even frame the nature of his guilt for preserving his own life while leaving his military brothers to their fate.⁴¹ If, conversely, Bell had more directly referenced the experience of his ancestors, he would have recalled that even actions based upon a belief in God's sanction do not guarantee any form of success, be it military, political, or the capture of a mass murderer.⁴² Through such a sense of limits on human endeavor, Bell would have more easily grappled with at least some measure of skepticism the American exceptionalism that he had both assumed and represented. In not having appreciated the historical tension between his Southern and American roots, however, as Sheriff Bell comes of age after 1945 and during the era of virtually unchallenged American hegemony, he does not permit himself the foresight to grasp what was almost certainly apparent to other law enforcement officers across the world: that neither the young man on Huntsville's death row nor especially Anton Chigurh were of 'some new kind'. Rather, the brutality of their indifference only portrayed the realities of the human experience.

³⁶ See Lydia R. Cooper, "'He's a Psychological Killer, but So What?': Folklore and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*", *Papers on Language and Literature: Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 45, (2009), 37-59.

³⁷ See *NC*, 240.

³⁸ See *NC*, 240, 259-260, 123. Cf. Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Volume 1: The Path to Power* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1982), pp. 5-10.

³⁹ See Downs, p. 10.

⁴⁰ See *NC*, 90-91.

⁴¹ See *NC*, 276-278.

⁴² See *NC*, 295.

At the same time, Bell's experience in failing to capture Chiguhr leads him not only to end his career with early retirement, but open up the ways in which those same American and Southern roots, within the bounds of evangelical Protestantism, had connected with one another over the course of his life.⁴³ Reflecting on the conversation with Llewelyn Moss' father as he had related the death of his son, Bell indicates how the American experience in Vietnam did not cause but only heighten the already extant decay in institutional trust. As Bell quotes Moss the father's words:

People will tell you it was Vietnam that brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just/the icing on the cake. We didn't have nothing to give em to take over there. If we'd sent em without rifles I don't know as they'd been all that much worse off. You cant go to war like that. You cant go to war without God. I dont know what is going to happen when the next one comes. I surely dont (NC, 294-5).

Bell's thoughts continue to express a frustration that the same generation of Americans who saved Western civilisation had with breathtaking speed become so enmeshed in its aftermath of material sloth that they seemed unwilling to hold their own grandchildren accountable for their sense of entitlement. Bell's specificity about '*green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldnt even understand*' notes a series of concerns over an individualism that does not comprehend itself within the bounds of a community undergirded by functioning, if obviously imperfect, institutions (NC, 295). With Chiguhr apparently continuing to murder at will and still having no reason to do so, Bell wonders how these same entitled Americans could even begin to comprehend what will almost certainly be 'comin down the[ir] pike'.

In referring to the Judeo-Christian deity, Bell and Moss the father are, quite apparently, speaking more culturally than theologically. Through their memories of American victory in war, they connect that triumph with a functioning and trustworthy institution, such as the heavy industry that supplied those same rifles to a military which did not simply defeat its enemies, but aided them in their restoration from ruin.⁴⁴ Using the language of their evangelical Protestant backgrounds, but more speaking from the notion of a generally accepted and functioning moral order, Bell and Llewelyn's father echo the 'common phrase' uttered during the war: that '[w]e are all in this together', and, in that sense of shared community, how 'the American people had produced magnificently, fought valiantly, and destroyed their evil enemies'.⁴⁵ As the war receded from immediate experience, most of these Americans continued to assume, as Bell and Moss the father indicate, that '[t]hey would join harmoniously to make things better and better in the years ahead'.⁴⁶ By the time of their conversation in 1980, however, Sheriff Bell and Moss the father had come to fear that the notion of a shared obligation had become 'stricken by a profound [and]

⁴³ See NC, 3-4, 90-91, 295.

⁴⁴ Cf. Patterson, pp. 7-8, and Rose, p. 17.

⁴⁵ Patterson, p. 8.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

embittered' cultural decay, so 'profound' that the only way to defeat it was, in effect, to surrender (*NC*, 294-5, 123). Via the biblical paradox expressed through the lens of evangelical Protestantism, Bell's Texas ancestors with Georgia roots had given him the means to surrender in victory and subsequently preserve his connection to the moral order that he represented.

It is notable that McCarthy portrays Bell's relationship to those realities from the novel's first pages. Observing the bloodbath of the drug battle onto which Llewelyn Moss had stumbled, Bell perceives that something has changed within the relationship between criminals and the legal authorities who pursued them.⁴⁷ Though he distinguishes between 'the same ones my granddaddy had to deal with [b]ack [when] they was rustling cattle' and those presently 'runnin dope', Sheriff Bell realises that those differences do not capture the full reality of what his eyes tell him (*NC*, 79). "I'm like you", he tells Deputy Torbert, "I aint 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 an annex on to hell" (*NC*, 79). Bell reinforces his uncertainty in later instances, among them matters as simple as the lack of traditional courtesies of saying "sir" and "ma'am" when speaking to one's elders (*NC*, 304). From his perspective, even these small graces reflect upon the larger structures that maintain a moral sense of decency which Chiguhr presently not only has destroyed, but reduces to the flip of a coin.⁴⁸

Through the point of encountering both the young murderer in Huntsville and, even more so, Anton Chigurh, Sheriff Bell presumes the stability of those cultural frames of reference. Despite feeling revulsion from his conversation with the death row inmate, Bell is still able to find a point of common reference in the young man's consignment of himself to a traditionally Protestant notion of eternal damnation. Bell further retains the centrality of his background by visiting the prisoner while still seeking additional means through which he might understand such profound levels of indifference expressed by a fellow human being. Beyond those metaphors and the constructions of reality from which they arise, however, Bell remains, as he retrospectively indicates, unprepared for his encounter with Chigurh.⁴⁹

While not an 'innocent' in the terms by which Woodward describes the non-Southern parts of American life after 1865, Bell does represent a type of American anxiety that emerges after the 9-11 attacks on New York and Washington. Instead of discourses that separate, even shakily, the cultural sheep from the goats, Bell now faces a new world seemingly ruled only by the 'chance and death' of a coin flip that provides the determinative factor in life and morality.⁵⁰ As he chases, encounters, and finally abandons his quest for Chiguhr, Sheriff Bell realises that the traditional structures of moral relationship have been uprooted by someone who can simply reshape them at will until 'chance and death' come his way. It does not, Bell understands still further, matter to Chigurh that such an arbitrary reality will come for him just as much as it did for Llewelyn or

⁴⁷ See *NC*, 76-79, 46-47.

⁴⁸ See *NC*, 4, 55-57, 251-260.

⁴⁹ See *NC*, 3-5.

⁵⁰ Robinson, p. 91. See *NC*, 55-57, 251-260.

Carla Jean Moss. Chigurh's only concern is to avoid these moral signs and their cultural signifiers for as long as possible. As Sheriff Bell faces such a reality where he cannot fulfill his obligations based in discourses that had guided his life, even through sending a teenage boy to the gas chamber, he realises how he has no moral choice but to abandon the search and retire.

In constructing *No Country for Old Men* from the lens of white Southern defeat in the Civil War, rather than American victory in World War II, McCarthy begins to replace what may appear as unrelenting gloom with an acceptance that, while acknowledging limits are inevitable, understands their possibilities in creating a space that offers a transformative path toward some form of functioning morality. Vincent Allan King, in moving the novel beyond an understanding of a generic pot-boiler detective story, refers to its complex means '[that] manipulate our aesthetic and moral anxieties about such fiction'.⁵¹ King continues that those anxieties focus around 'our assumption that Sheriff Bell [is] the moral center of the novel'.⁵² Through a working conjunction with *No Country's* portrayal of Llewelyn Moss and Anton Chigurh, along with the Sheriff's italicised reflections that increasingly take on a tone of decay and despair, it only seems reasonable that Bell would come to be perceived through King's perspective. By arguing that *No Country* 'conflate[s] genre fiction with aesthetic and moral complacency', however, King notes how several critics have referenced either McCarthy's 'unremitting violence', his supposed use of 'a variety of disreputable literary genres', or the ways by which his fiction appears to align itself with 'various masters of popular entertainment'.⁵³

Instead offering an alternative view, King stipulates that Sheriff Bell's italicised ruminations, as they are followed by longer narratives which detail the actions of either Chigurh or Llewelyn Moss, move the novel beyond a superficial mix of genre formulations. King conversely argues how in moving past the singular chase between Moss and Chigurh, *No Country* explores the implications of Sheriff Bell's retirement with the mass murderer still at large. Conceding Bell's 'general decency', King nevertheless stresses that after the aura enshrined upon previous fictional detectives by Raymond Chandler and others, Bell's relinquishment of the quest for Chigurh leaves him as something other than 'the moral paragon that we assume he is'.⁵⁴ Focusing upon Bell's confession of cowardice toward his military fellows during combat, King links that choice to the sheriff's perceived moral failing that he, in this reading, also seems to exhibit in an early retirement from law enforcement.⁵⁵ Such behavior, extending more thirty years, leads King to conclude that Sheriff Bell becomes the 'compatriot' and 'partner' to the fantasies of wealth or divinity respectively portrayed by Moss and Chigurh.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Vincent Allan King, 'What have you done, What have you failed to do: Aesthetic and Moral Complacency in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*', *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures*, 65, (2012), 533-556, p. 535.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 535.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 537.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 544-545.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 549. See *NC*, 275-279.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 549-551.

To a degree, King structures his belief in Bell's perceived failing through a reference toward Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium', from which McCarthy draws the name of the novel. By noting how Yeats might be read as an ironic criticism 'of the speaker's desire to exchange quotidian reality for the "artifice of eternity"', King admits that such analyses might allow for the novel's exploration of serious moral qualms within American life during the first two decades of the present century.⁵⁷ Bell's retirement, King conversely indicates, is no matter of irony, but one of utter seriousness.

King continues, through an endnote, how Bell 'actually quits his position as sheriff twice'. After some years away from law enforcement and presumably separated from the anxiety over chasing criminals, Sheriff Bell 'reassumes his position, but retires when he becomes unwilling to face Chigurh'. It appears, King writes, 'that Bell has a penchant for quitting'.⁵⁸ Within that argument, it becomes more difficult to imagine how King might allow himself to see any other way to understand the Sheriff's decision as both a law enforcement officer and as a man. In fact, however, Bell's choice to retire, even as he well knows that it leaves Chigurh uncaptured and will open him to the contempt of his neighbors (as well as literary critics), expresses a morality that is neither complacent nor cowardly. By retiring as he did, Bell took the more difficult option, but one that reflected the decency that King conceded as a core of the sheriff's character. Rather than blaming himself for running away from an intractable moral dilemma, Bell recognises his failure, and in doing so, removes himself from the temptation toward an arrogance that might have created the moral monster he most feared becoming. In his own words, Bell realises that he 'would put [his] soul at hazard. And [he] wont do that'.

Such a refusal, however, does carry still more irony within it. Bell's refusal to sell his soul presumes that morality exists in some form, and that choices such as his do bear consequences. While not quite a desperate stance against nihilism, Bell's morality comes from the same dynamic that Woodward uses to describe the American, rather than white Southern, sense of self after World War II. Horrified by the indifference of the nineteen-year-old young man he visited in Huntsville, Bell could still take refuge in that he had been investigated, captured, tried, convicted, sentenced, and was now soon to be executed within the bounds of functioning jurisprudence. Despite the young man's stunning lack of feeling, Bell's description of how he would shortly, by self-admission, be 'in hell', makes him an exception rather than the norm. As he investigated the crime in question, Bell did so from the belief that, of course, the American and Western legal system had, as one immediate post-war example from Bell's young manhood, held fair trials for surviving Nazi officials at Nuremberg, and achieved a result rooted in proportionate judgment.⁵⁹ Upon encountering the force known as Anton Chigurh, however, Sheriff Bell discovers that something had happened to turn those same institutions, and their roots in a purposed and expressed morality, all too horribly against themselves.

⁵⁷ King, p. 541-542.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 544, note 13.

⁵⁹ See *NC*, 148. Cf. Joseph Persico, *Nuremberg: Infamy on Trial* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1994), pp. 280-282, 396, 411-412.

By moving past the American notion of exceptional fortune, and toward the sectional heritage of his defeated ancestors, Bell comes to grasp that any form of complete national sanctification is, at heart, a fantasy. As his Uncle Ellis reflects, '[y]ou wear out, Ed Tom. All the time you spend tryin to get back what's been took from you there's more goin out the door. After a while you just try to get a tourniquet on it' (*NC*, 267). Instead of a victorious superiority, Bell hears his uncle express that the basis of moral living is rooted in failure, loss, and incompleteness. Such principles, Ellis further explains, provide a means by which his nephew 'can still be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than they're worth' (*NC*, 267). Bell might have, of course, continued his pursuit of Chiguhr and even somehow later captured him. In doing so, Sheriff Bell might have ended his career amongst a flourish of adulation that proclaimed how he had saved civilisation from an amoral monster. Through the abandonment of his chase and his conversation with Ellis, however, Sheriff Bell instead comes to understand some triumphs 'cost more than they're worth'.

At this point, King's argument bears further merit, especially from the context of America's all too adequate sense of national righteousness in the years following 1945. Stopping Chigurh in that context would have been an absolute necessity that needed to be accomplished at almost any cost. If such a cost had fallen to Bell and come to endanger either his sense of morality or perhaps his evangelically Protestant soul, King argues that such sacrifices would have been worth the price. Within those sacrifices, quite apparently, lies the American logic of redeemed certitude. Moral ambiguities ever readily presented themselves in both grand and mundane ways as Bell fought for the rights of man during World War II. Such ambiguities, as Bell came to know, sometimes result in large losses of life.⁶⁰ Those temporary setbacks nonetheless allowed Americans, in their certitude toward final victory, the means to explain, perpetuate, and cleanse themselves from whatever lack of sanctity they may have needed to utilise during the war. Once cleansed as the divinely blessed exception among the nations, America would experience renewal, and Bell, as a military and law enforcement hero who brought even Chigurh to justice, placed within a canonised position of functioning cultural relationships. Within that system, King's criticism of Bell's decision to retire makes perfect sense.

From the standpoint of experience in the white American South, and, more broadly, the rest of the world, however, Bell's retirement opens upon a different type of understanding. Through the context of his Georgia ancestors and Appomattox Court House, the sheriff's chosen failure to capture a murderer from fear that he would become lose his evangelical soul is an appropriate statement of principled morality. Bell's admission, despite his earlier ambiguities, further acknowledges that 'some new kind' did not just suddenly appear. Facing them, as Ed Tom Bell comes to understand in his pursuit of Chigurh, brings forth irreconcilable moral difficulties that will always confront women and men in the late twentieth, and now the twenty-first, centuries. Even as we may choose to confront these dilemmas, Americans who are Sheriff Bell's descendants can no longer claim an absolute sense of cultural superiority.

⁶⁰ See *NC*, 276-277.

Such acknowledgement, and the choices that flow from it, however, still does not concede King's argument that Americans after 9-11 have somehow relinquished the desire for having any type of moral position in the world.⁶¹ To do so would once more express what blinded American life to the complexities that rest of humanity continues to assume as a matter of normalcy. Moral choice was and remains difficult. Redemption may still be possible, but it is a matter of faith rather than certainty. Human discourse, McCarthy suggests at the novel's conclusion, reflects more instances of failure than it does triumph.⁶² Ultimately, McCarthy nonetheless writes that despite the myriad complexities of chance and doubt, Sheriff Bell's successful failure expresses that we as humans can still maintain moral guideposts and, within them, forge meaningful relationships with each other. Such relationships in themselves, it seems, are worth preserving.

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⁶¹ See King, p. 545.

⁶² See *NC*, 307-309.

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