



AESTHETICS OF MINIMALIST NEO-WESTERN CRIME THRILLER: READING OF CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*

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Abstract: Neo-western Crime Thriller is a recent postmodern reconfiguration of American Crime Thriller that has gained momentum and popularity in the recent decades. This sub-genre of fiction combines minimalism with the features of cowboy thrillers to re-render the historical moments with a postmodern touch. This brand of fiction provides a new experience of reading fiction by giving a grim introspective look into the traditional genre of western fiction. Ellipses, omissions, dropping of speech markers and the imagist mode of description provide the new aesthetic experience in such a narrative. Ironic and subversive invocation of western troops is another tenant of this narrative. This paper makes an attempt to analyse Cormac McCarthy's minimalist postmodern western crime thriller *No Country for Old Men* to show how this narrative alters the conventional genre. It also scrutinises the novel for its experimental use of narrative, characterization, setting and dialogue to recreate the history of drug related crime of the Mexico, United States border of the 1980s. McCarthy's use of game like narrative is also examine in this paper.

IndexTerms: Minimalism, Crime Thriller, Postmodernism, New Aesthetics

American novelist and playwright Cormac McCarthy was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933. He is well-known for his unique style and examination of existentially grim subjects. Over the course of several decades, McCarthy has written several books, many of which explore the brutal realities of violence, human nature, and the American landscape. Novels like *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) and *Outer Dark* (1968) from McCarthy's early literary career demonstrated his early investigation of Southern Gothic themes. His study of rural Appalachia was resumed in *Child of God* (1973), which portrayed McCarthy's decline. *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first book in his Border Trilogy, helped him achieve wider acclaim. Set against the backdrop of the border between Texas and Mexico, the book won McCarthy the National Book Award for Fiction.

With *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), the trilogy resumed, delving further into themes of love, grief, and the evolving American West. With the release of *No Country for Old Men* in 2005, McCarthy entered the world of criminal thrillers. The book, which won McCarthy the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, is set in West Texas, and examines the fallout from a heroin deal gone awry.

The study of the American West, lyrical yet stark style, and a thematic focus on violence, morality, and the human experience define Cormac McCarthy's body of work. McCarthy is considered by many to be one of the most significant and influential writers of the modern era in America, despite his little public presence.

At the core of McCarthy's narrative style lies an unmistakable minimalism, a deliberate restraint in language that eschews embellishment. The novel's dialogue is particularly sparse, devoid of unnecessary exposition or ornamentation. This linguistic minimalism serves to intensify the narrative, creating a stark and desolate atmosphere that mirrors the harsh landscapes and moral ambiguity within the story. McCarthy's choice of minimalistic language highlights the power of brevity in conveying profound meaning.

Within the realm of postmodern literature, the traditional hero-villain dichotomy is often dismantled, and *No Country for Old Men* exemplifies this departure. The character of Anton Chigurh, the enigmatic antagonist, defies conventional villainous archetypes. His randomness and nihilistic worldview challenge readers' expectations, contributing to the novel's exploration of moral ambiguity. The absence of clear distinctions between good and evil aligns with postmodern skepticism towards simplistic narratives, forcing readers to confront the complexities of human nature. McCarthy employs a fragmented narrative structure that eschews linear storytelling, opting instead for a non-linear approach that shifts perspectives without traditional transitions. This fragmentation creates a sense of disorientation, mirroring the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the events within the narrative. Readers are left to piece together the larger story, embodying a postmodern approach that rejects the conventional, linear progression found in traditional narratives.

A hallmark of postmodern literature is the exploration of existential themes, and *No Country for Old Men* does not shy away from this tradition. The novel grapples with questions of morality, fate, and the fundamental nature of human existence. McCarthy's treatment of these themes is nuanced, offering open-ended reflections that resist providing concrete answers. The existential undertones in the novel underscore the postmodern inclination to question grand narratives and challenge established truths. In its narrative structure and thematic content, *No Country for Old Men* subverts traditional genre conventions, particularly those associated with the crime thriller genre. While elements of a crime narrative are present, McCarthy deliberately deviates from the expected trajectory. The lack of a clear resolution, the absence of a traditional hero, and the exploration of philosophical themes transcend conventional genre boundaries, contributing to the novel's postmodern character.

The genre known as 'neo-Western' is a modern take on classic Western storytelling, updating its locations and themes to reflect current issues and viewpoints. The neo-Western, with its roots in Western literature and movies, arose in reaction to shifting political, social, and cultural environments. Stories of the American frontier, exploration, and conflict between settlers, native Americans, and outlaws define the Western genre, which has a long history in American literature and film. With noble protagonists and evil villains set against huge vistas and wild wilderness, classic Westerns frequently depicted stark moral dichotomies.

In the second part of the 20th century, as society's attitudes and ideals changed, authors and filmmakers started to question the conventional Western formula. In reaction to the shifting cultural landscape, the neo-Western arose, providing a more nuanced and sophisticated representation of the American West. This progression was characterised by a shift away from the classic hero-villain relationship and towards contemporary themes, psychological nuance, and moral ambiguity.

With their complicated motivations and nuanced portrayals of characters, Neo-Westerns frequently subvert the traditional Westerns' black-and-white moral paradigm. Neo-Westerns, in contrast to conventional Westerns, are usually set in the present or more recent past and tackle modern social and political concerns. conventional Westerns are set in the 19th-century frontier. Urbanization, environmental deterioration, and the effects of modernity on the Western landscape are all common themes in neo-Western literature. Protagonists in neo-Westerns may deviate from the traditional virtuous cowboy archetype, embodying flaws, inner conflicts, and anti-heroic qualities. Neo-Westerns often strive for a greater degree of realism, eschewing romanticized portrayals of the Old West in favor of grittier, more authentic narratives.

Cormac McCarthy's 2005 book *No Country for Old Men* later adapted as a film by the Coen Brothers showcases the neo-Western genre's examination of moral complexity and modern environments. The neo-Western has not only revitalized interest in the Western genre but has also allowed for a more diverse and nuanced exploration of American identity, history, and landscape. It continues to be a dynamic genre that adapts to contemporary concerns while retaining the enduring appeal of Western storytelling.

According to Robert Jarret, *No Country for Old Men* mirrors both the detective novel and the postmodern gothic crime drama, each presenting unique plots and metaphysical assumptions. Over time, the once seemingly supernatural evil transforms into a psychologized entity, with the serial killer's violence becoming a language expressing psychological trauma.

No country imitates both the novel of detection and the postmodern gothic crime drama, each with its distinct plot and metaphysical assumptions. If the detection of evil is central to both forms, in the novel of detection—in Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*, in Patricia Cornwell's novels, and in other forensic thrillers—the awareness of the forensic detective interprets the semiotic clues left by the serial killer. In these novels the confrontation with an ostensibly supernatural evil is progressively psychologized and the serial killer's violence is progressively reduced to a language that expresses his or her psychological trauma. The threat of metaphysical evil is thus naturalized, as in Ann Radcliffe's late eighteenth-century Gothic. (Jarret 36)

Jarret is of the view that in *No Country for Old Men* Anton Chigurh embodies metaphysical evil, yet the novel's portrayal of a mundane and lifeless world aims to diminish his metaphysical significance. This narrative shift results in readers being left with a mere silhouette of his metaphysical role:

In *No Country for Old Men*, Anton Chigurh is this signifier of metaphysical evil, although the banality and flatness of the world represented in the novel exists to erase his metaphysical function. This narrative erasure leaves readers with only the outline of this metaphysical function. (Jarret 37)

While structurally analyzing the narrative, Jarret finds the violence irrational. And while analyzing it realistically, the violence aligns with the economic competition for market dominance:

...I would argue for a structural analysis of Chigurh's violence and of its essential relation to the narrative. If Chigurh's violence appears senseless, this is so only because we refract the text's violence through the lens of the thriller. In realistic terms, outside of the aesthetics of the thriller, for the last decade Nuevo Laredo on the southwestern border has been the center of a series of drug wars and drug-related violence a violence that make a great deal of "sense," at least when analyzed under economic terms as the struggle between rival cartels for market supremacy and as an existential expression of the control of illicit commerce over the "forces" of law and order. In political terms, this violence has undercut the myth of the United States' "control" of its always-permeable southwestern borderlands. After the recent daylight assassination of a journalist in his office in Nuevo Laredo, Chigurh's violence almost appears tame beside a grim social reality. In this respect, Chigurh's violence may be the opposite of the nonsensical, marking the realist-naturalistic imperative driving *No Country for Old Men* as a contemporary analogue to the hyper-realistic depiction of nineteenth-century violence in *Blood Meridian*. (Jarret 38)

A dynamic and well-liked subgenre in both literature and film, crime thrillers capture readers with their gripping stories, complex themes, and frequent emphasis on illegal activity. Crime thrillers are a broad genre that can include many different subgenres and styles, but they are distinguished by a few essential traits. Crime thrillers are distinguished by a mystery or puzzle that moves the story along. Usually, this keeps the audience on the edge of their seat, wanting to find out along with the characters. They feature well-woven intricate plots with multiple storylines, climaxes and turns. The audience cannot but be engaged and constantly guessing until the resolution.

Protagonists in crime thrillers are often detectives, investigators, or individuals with a keen sense of curiosity. They are driven to solve the central mystery, and their skills, intelligence, or expertise are crucial to the story's development. An antagonist or a group of enemies involved in illegal activity is a common plot device in crime thrillers. These enemies can be anything from organised crime and serial murders to dishonest public servants and elaborate schemes. Characters in crime thrillers usually deal with moral ambiguity, deciding on actions that straddle the boundaries of good and wrong. This raises issues of justice and morality and gives character development more dimension. In contemporary crime fiction, themes like serial killers, violence targeting

women, and forensic investigation are common, yet the actuality of criminal behaviour tends to be more ordinary: “*Serial Killers, violence against women and forensic investigation are all staples of modern crime fiction, but the reality of criminal activity is rather mundane*” (Arnott 28).

Authors and filmmakers in the crime thriller genre frequently employ red herrings—misleading clues or plot developments—to divert the audience's attention and maintain the element of surprise. Crime thrillers heavily rely on the setting. The backdrop, whether it is a secluded, dramatic location, a tranquil suburban neighbourhood, or the mean streets of a city, adds to the narrative's overall tension and mood.

Minimalist narrative embraces a concise and stripped-down approach to storytelling. It relies heavily on sparse prose, inviting reader's interpretation, and fill the narrative gap. The fundamental principle of minimalism is to insist on removing judgment from the work, creating an environment where the absence of intention is evident:

Above all, complain such readers, minimalist art does not require moral involvement—not the author's, not the reader's.

The key precept of minimalism appears to be precisely this requirement that the work be stripped of judgment and invite no judgment; the minimalist work deletes any sign of the work's having an intention upon us. (Facknitz 63)

McCarthy's work is known for its economy of words and sparsity. The novel's sense of immediacy and urgency are increased by the prose's minimalism and lack of needless embellishments. Readers can concentrate on the story's key components because to this minimalist approach. The following extract is evidence of his use of spare language: “I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five. Hard to believe. My father was not a lawman. Jack was my grandfather. Me and him was sheriff at the same time, him in Piano and me here” (McCarthy 33).

West Texas's vast and barren landscapes serve as the backdrop for the book. The general atmosphere of the narrative is enhanced by McCarthy's descriptions of the untamed landscape, desolate deserts, and remote villages. The harsh and merciless surroundings take on a life of their own, mirroring the difficulties the protagonists of the book encounter. The setting of the novel, which lies along the border between Texas and Mexico, has symbolic meaning. The borderland is a metaphor for a transitional area where it becomes difficult to distinguish between morality and amorality, law, and anarchy. It turns becomes a metaphor for how moral ambiguity and the eroding lines separating order and chaos are explored in the book.

McCarthy uses recurring visual themes in his work to give it coherence and thematic resonance. The employment of weapons, tracking devices, and coin toss are a few examples of motifs that add to the novel's visual language and give the story metaphorical weight. The way these characters are portrayed, and their inner conflicts are fundamental to the novel's aesthetic. McCarthy adds to the novel's artistic depth by delving into the moral quandaries that his characters—especially Anton Chigurh—face. The entire narrative intricacy is increased by the emphasis on the motivations and psychology of the characters.

Chigurh is frequently portrayed as the embodiment of chaos and fate. His preferred weapon, a captive bolt pistol, and his reliance on coin flips to decide life and death help to create a metaphorical picture of chance and fate's indifference. Chigurh's character's simplicity enhances his symbolic meaning and enables readers to consider the philosophical ramifications of his deeds. McCarthy emphasizes Chigurh's icy and unforgiving demeanour by giving only the most pertinent information about his physical attributes. By keeping things simple, the reader is forced to concentrate on the character's deeds and how he affects other people rather than on his outward appearance.

The narrator reflects on the state of the world, expressing concern about the prevalence of serious crimes and the apparent indifference or desensitization of people. This social commentary is a common feature in crime thrillers that often explore societal issues. The narrator's perspective on the difference between “raping and murdering people and chewing gum” suggests a moral stance and a character-driven viewpoint. This moral complexity is a key aspect of crime thrillers where characters often grapple with ethical dilemmas:

Chewin gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature. So they got one of them forms that was blank and printed up a bunch of em and sent em back out to the same schools. Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide. So I think about that. Because a lot of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I'm gettin old. That it's one of the symptoms. But my feelin about that is that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I've got. Forty years is not a long time neither. Maybe the next forty of it. (McCarthy 195-196)

McCarthy explores issues of fate, choice, and the inevitable nature of violence while evoking an existential tone throughout the book. The story's pervasive existential angst is heightened by McCarthy's artistic decisions, and the characters struggle with a sense of dread. The book is interspersed with silent passages and whispered conversations. McCarthy's characters frequently express themselves by deeds rather than words, which contributes to the subtle and reflective style of the book. The narrative's intensity and unpredictability are increased by this quiet communication.

The moral centre of the book is Sheriff Bell, who offers observations on how morality and criminality are evolving in the American West. McCarthy presents Bell's ideas and opinions in a direct and unadorned manner, utilising a minimalist approach to Bell's persona. Bell's insights and the weight of his load as he navigates the growing cruelty of the world around him are highlighted by this minimalism. Bell's brief but moving reflections capture his inner turmoil and sense of helplessness in the face of mounting violence. McCarthy's spare depiction of Bell's inner turmoil enables readers to identify with the character's sense of disappointment and the difficulties of upholding morality in a cruel and merciless setting.

The story's suspense and tension are increased by the characters' understated portrayals. McCarthy intentionally leaves some details about the characters ambiguous to evoke a sense of unpredictability that keeps readers on edge as they attempt to make sense of the events that are transpiring. The emphasis is shifted from characters to more comprehensive topic investigations in minimalist characterizations. McCarthy uses Chigurh, Moss, and Bell as lenses through which to explore morality, existential issues, and the certainty of fate. The delicacy of character detail highlights this thematic complexity.

Readers are encouraged to actively interact with the characters by the minimalist approach, which leaves room for them to fill in the blanks and form their own conclusions. A more individualised and subjective reading experience of the characters and their motivations is made possible by this interactive reading experience. In the book, violence is portrayed as a ubiquitous and frequently senseless force, personified by Anton Chigurh. The unpredictability and apathy of violence are highlighted by Chigurh's use of a captive bolt pistol and his arbitrary coin tosses to decide life or death. McCarthy criticises a culture in which violence can arise haphazardly and isn't necessarily motivated by obvious reasons.

The narrative shows how people are becoming less sensitive to violence on both a personal and a communal level. Moss and Chigurh, among other characters, live in a society where crime is rampant and violence is a common occurrence, which numbs moral sensibilities. Readers are forced to face the repercussions of living in a culture that is accustomed to—and occasionally even involved in—extreme brutality by McCarthy's narrative decisions.

McCarthy creates a morally grey universe in which his characters must make decisions that go against accepted moral precepts. Both Chigurh's coin tosses and Llewellyn Moss's choice to accept the drug money subvert conventional ideas of right and wrong. The story depicts a society in which morality is ill-defined and people struggle to accept the consequences of their choices. He offers a thoughtful perspective on the shifting moral terrain through the persona of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. Bell's reflections on the growing brutality he experiences and his feelings of helplessness in the face of it reveal a moral discomfort in society. The internal conflict of the sheriff turns into a microcosm of larger social issues with justice and morality.

No Country for Old Men did, in fact, play a crucial part in upending and reconfiguring established Western genre norms, resulting in a profound change in the way the American West was portrayed in books and movies. Cormac McCarthy's book and the Coen Brothers' well-received film version of it impacted later works that attempted to examine the complexity and moral dilemmas present in the Western environment. The critical reception of *No Country for Old Men* was instrumental in elevating the status of the neo-Western crime thriller genre. The novel's impact on subsequent works in both literature and film is evident in the adoption of minimalist aesthetics, the exploration of morality and existential themes, and a broader reimagining of the Western genre for a contemporary audience.

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