

A Study of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 3

Month: April

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Absarabanu, S., and R. Kavitha. "A Study of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S3, 2026, pp. 44–47.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS3-Apr.10847>

S. Absarabanu

M.A. English Literature
Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Dr. R. Kavitha

Assistant Professor of English
Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Abstract

*This paper examines the themes of violence, morality, and the transformation of social values in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Set in the Texas–Mexico border region, the novel portrays a harsh world where crime and brutality have become increasingly common, challenging the survival of traditional moral values. Through the characters of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, Llewellyn Moss, and Anton Chigurh, McCarthy presents different perspectives on justice, fate, and human responsibility. Sheriff Bell represents an older generation that struggles to understand the growing violence of the modern world, while Moss becomes an ordinary man caught in a dangerous situation after discovering a large amount of drug money. Anton Chigurh, on the other hand, is portrayed as a relentless and ruthless figure who believes that human life is controlled by fate. Through this portrayal, *No Country for Old Men* serves as a powerful commentary on the decline of traditional values and the struggle of individuals to understand violence and chaos in the modern world.*

Keywords: Violence, Morality, Fate, Justice, Moral Decline, Modern Society.

Cormac McCarthy is widely known for his powerful and often dark portrayal of human life, violence, and morality. His novel *No Country for Old Men* presents a disturbing picture of a society where traditional values and moral certainty seem to be disappearing. Set along the Texas–Mexico border, the story follows the events that unfold after Llewellyn Moss discovers a large amount of drug money at the scene of a failed drug deal. What begins as an act of curiosity quickly turns into a dangerous struggle for survival, as Moss becomes the target of the ruthless killer Anton Chigurh.

At the same time, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell tries to understand and control the violence that is spreading throughout his community. Through Bell's reflections, the novel expresses a deep concern about the changes taking place in society and the difficulty of maintaining justice in a world that appears increasingly chaotic. McCarthy uses these characters to explore larger questions about fate, morality, and the nature of evil. This study aims to examine how *No Country for Old Men* reflects the growing uncertainty of moral values in modern society. By analyzing the major characters and themes in the novel, the study highlights how McCarthy presents a world where violence

often overpowers justice and where individuals struggle to make sense of the changing social and moral landscape.

No Country for Old Men is a novel written by Cormac McCarthy and published in 2005. The story is set in the Texas–Mexico border region during the late twentieth century, a time when drug trafficking and crime were becoming more common in the area. McCarthy uses this setting to present a harsh and realistic picture of society where violence and fear influence the lives of ordinary people. The desert landscape and isolated towns in the novel also help to create a tense and uncertain atmosphere throughout the story. The plot begins when Llewellyn Moss, a welder and Vietnam War veteran, accidentally discovers the scene of a failed drug deal while hunting in the desert. At the site, he finds several dead bodies, a truck full of heroin, and a suitcase containing a large amount of money. Moss decides to take the money, believing it will change his life, but this decision soon leads to a series of dangerous events. He becomes the target of Anton Chigurh, a ruthless killer who is determined to recover the missing money.

At the same time, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell investigates the case and reflects on the increasing violence in his community. Through his thoughts and experiences, the novel shows how older generations struggle to understand the cruelty and chaos of the modern world. The background of the novel, therefore, combines elements of crime, Western storytelling, and social commentary, creating a narrative that explores the changing nature of morality and justice in contemporary society. Violence is one of the central elements in *No Country for Old Men*. Throughout the novel, Cormac McCarthy presents a world where violence appears sudden, brutal, and often unavoidable. The story begins with the discovery of several dead bodies in the desert after a failed drug deal, which immediately sets the tone for the rest of the narrative. As the events unfold, the characters are constantly surrounded by danger, showing how deeply violence has entered their lives.

Along with violence, the novel also explores moral conflict among the characters. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell represents a traditional sense of morality and justice. As a law officer, he believes in maintaining order and protecting innocent people. However, as he witnesses the increasing brutality around him, he begins to feel that the world is changing in ways he cannot fully understand. His reflections reveal his struggle to accept the growing cruelty and lawlessness in society. Llewellyn Moss also experiences moral conflict after he finds the suitcase full of money at the crime scene. Although he knows the money does not belong to him, he decides to take it, hoping for a better life. This decision places him in a dangerous situation and leads to a series of violent confrontations. Through Moss, the novel shows how a single choice can lead to serious consequences.

Anton Chigurh represents the extreme side of violence in the novel. He believes that fate controls human life and often decides the lives of others through his own strict and unusual logic. His actions show little sympathy or emotion, which makes him appear almost unstoppable. Through these characters and their experiences, McCarthy highlights the strong connection between violence and moral conflict, showing how individuals struggle to make ethical choices in a world filled with danger and uncertainty. The story centers on three central characters: Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, Llewellyn Moss, and Anton Chigurh. Each character plays a major role in shaping the events of the novel and helps the reader understand the themes of violence and morality.

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is the local sheriff who tries to solve the crimes connected with the drug deal and the missing money. He is an older man who has spent many years working in law enforcement. Throughout the story, Bell often thinks about how the world has changed and how crime has become more violent than before. He feels troubled by the cruelty he sees around him and sometimes believes that the world is no longer suitable for people like him, who still believe in traditional values. Llewellyn Moss is a welder and a Vietnam War veteran. His life takes a sudden turn when he discovers the scene of a failed drug deal in the desert and finds a suitcase filled with

money. Instead of reporting it to the police, he decides to take the money with him. This decision places him in great danger, as several people begin searching for him. Moss spends much of the story trying to escape from those who are chasing him.

Anton Chigurh is the man hired to recover the lost money. He is known for being extremely dangerous and showing little emotion or sympathy. Chigurh follows his own strange sense of logic and often decides the fate of others by flipping a coin. His calm and controlled behavior makes him one of the most frightening characters in the novel. Through these characters, the novel presents different attitudes toward crime, justice, and human choices. One of the important ideas explored in *No Country for Old Men* is the relationship between fate and justice. Throughout the novel, many events seem to happen in ways that are beyond the control of the characters. The story shows how people often find themselves in situations that are shaped by chance, decisions, and unexpected consequences.

Anton Chigurh strongly believes in the idea of fate. He often uses a coin toss to decide whether a person will live or die, claiming that the coin has already determined the outcome. For Chigurh, this act represents the belief that human life is guided by fate rather than personal choice. His actions show how he sees himself as someone who simply carries out what fate has already decided. On the other hand, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell represents the idea of justice and law. As a sheriff, he believes in maintaining order and protecting innocent people. However, as he follows the case and observes the violence around him, he begins to feel that justice is becoming harder to achieve. The crimes he witnesses make him question whether the traditional system of law is strong enough to deal with the cruelty present in the modern world.

Through these situations, the novel shows a conflict between fate and justice. While some characters believe that life is controlled by chance or destiny, others still try to uphold moral values and legal order. This tension between fate and justice becomes one of the key ideas that shapes the events of the story. One of the main concerns shown in *No Country for Old Men* is the idea that moral values in society are gradually weakening. Through the events of the story, the novel presents a world where violence, crime, and selfish decisions seem to be increasing. The characters often face situations where right and wrong become difficult to separate, showing how the social order is slowly changing. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell frequently reflects on how the world was different in the past. He believes that earlier generations respected the law and followed stronger moral principles. However, the crimes he investigates during the story make him feel that society has become more dangerous and unpredictable. His thoughts show his fear that the traditional values he believed in are disappearing.

The actions of the other characters also reflect this change. Llewellyn Moss's decision to take the money from the crime scene begins the chain of violent events that follow. Although he is not a criminal by nature, his choice leads him into a situation filled with danger and moral consequences. At the same time, Anton Chigurh represents a form of violence that shows no sympathy or concern for human life. Through these characters and their actions, the novel presents a picture of a society where violence and personal ambition often overcome moral responsibility. McCarthy uses this portrayal to show how individuals struggle to understand and deal with the changing moral conditions of the modern world.

In conclusion, *No Country for Old Men* presents a powerful picture of violence, morality, and the changing values of modern society. Through the experiences of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, Llewellyn Moss, and Anton Chigurh, the novel shows how individuals respond differently to crime, fate, and moral responsibility. Each character represents a different view of the world, which helps the reader understand the complex nature of justice and human choices. The novel also highlights how difficult it has become to maintain order and moral values in a world where violence seems

to be increasing. Sheriff Bell's reflections show the struggle of an older generation trying to understand a society that appears more dangerous and uncertain than before. At the same time, the actions of Moss and Chigurh demonstrate how personal decisions and beliefs can lead to serious consequences.

Overall, the novel presents a realistic and sometimes disturbing view of society. Through its characters and events, it raises important questions about fate, justice, and the decline of traditional moral values. In this way, *No Country for Old Men* remains an important work that encourages readers to think about the challenges of morality and justice in the modern world.

References

1. Iltis, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. Routledge, 2006.
2. Lincoln, Kenneth. *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
3. Luce, Dianne C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
4. McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. Vintage International, 2006.
5. Monk, Nicholas. "Moral Ambiguity in *No Country for Old Men*." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2010.
6. Phillips, Dana. "History and Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction." *American Literature*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1996.
7. Spurgeon, Sara L. *Exploding the Western*. Texas A&M University Press, 2005.
8. Wallach, Rick. *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Manchester University Press, 2000.
9. Welch, James D., and Philip A. McCarthy, eds. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. University of South Carolina Press, 1999.
10. Woodson, Linda Townley. "The Frontier in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction." *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2000.