The New Law of the Land: The Monster in *No Country For Old Men*

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Monsters are tied to what we consider normal or abnormal in our cultures. Jeffrey Cohen's "monster theory" states that society places its own anxiety or fear of something or someone who breaks cultural expectations into the monsters they create. The fear we have of these monsters makes them incredibly popular in our cultures. In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*, the main antagonist and cold-blooded killer Chigurh fits the mold of the monster theory perfectly in many ways. In the novel, after stealing millions of dollars from a drug deal gone awry, Moss is hunted down by Chigurh ruthlessly. He represents both the fear and desire of our societal norms by rejecting all humanity via his brutality; however, he maintains a playfulness when it comes to deciding his victims' fates, utilizing coin-flipping to determine whether the victims live or die. By looking at Chigurh through the lens of "monster theory," we see that he fits the mold of the traditional villain in crime fiction stories, while also managing to surprise readers by just how nefarious he really is. Of course, it would be unwise to assume that Chigurh is without humanity; he is often given shockingly human characteristics to ground him in reality, which makes him and the state of lawlessness he brings about all the more terrifying. What we gain by applying monster theory is seeing how a society's fear of violent crime is personified; it also lets us attempt to reassure ourselves of our own humanity in comparison to the absolute inhumanity of Chigurh. Through Chigurh, McCarthy has created one of the most memorable and remarkable monsters in crime fiction.

Jeffrey Cohen's original "monster theory" states that monsters are representative of our fears of something or someone that breaks our cultural norms. In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*, many tropes of the monstrous villain are both exhibited and contradicted by the primary antagonist Chigurh. Recruited to hunt down Moss for stealing millions of dollars in cash from a drug deal gone awry, we are given practically no knowledge of the person Chigurh was before the events of the story. The fact that he is a calculating, cold-blooded killer fits the monster theory lens present in crime fiction, but because Chigurh remains free at the end of the novel, lacks a motive or backstory, and is childishly characterized via his ignorance of his personal evil, he differs from the usual crime narrative monster. Chigurh still being free to commit more crimes is what makes McCarthy's central message about crime in general stronger. It paints an incredibly bleak picture of crime in modern America. To McCarthy, crime has gotten more violent since the old days, and there's nothing that can be done to stop it. This has real-world implications, with the primary message that Bell's friend Ellis tries to convey being that it is futile to try to change the world by oneself.

Chigurh uses coin-flipping to decide his victims' fate, creating a sense of arbitrariness to his crimes. This shows that he operates on chance rather than an actual moral system. While it would be misguided to assume Chigurh is completely inhuman, analyzing him with monster theory can reassure us of our own humanity in comparison to his ruthlessness. This is important in a world where crime grows more violent and ruthless. Using the lens of monster theory, we can identify the tropes of crime fiction, understand why they are relevant to society and crime in general, and analyze how our fears of violent crime are personified through monsters like Chigurh. All these aspects lead to a unique approach to crime narratives in which we anticipate the monster to be foiled by the good guys of the story. For the purposes of this examination, the novel will be used as the primary source as opposed to the film, owing to the narrative choices offered in the novel which alternate between sections narrated in the first person by Sheriff Bell and sections narrated in the third person perspective.

Monster theory encapsulates the fears of many different cultures' definitions of what is considered abnormal. In the theoretical framework, monsters are defined as anything that challenges established norms. To this end, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock says of monsters, "[T]he monster is the thing that, from a particular perspective in a given context, shouldn't be, but is" (3). In other words, monsters represent everything that could foreseeably go wrong in a thing or person from a certain perspective. There is little doubt that monsters have been related to a negative connotation in

culture, associated with something to fear and to be disgusted by. However, another facet of monster theory is how viewing monsters allows for introspection into one's own humanity. This is a key tenet of monster theory and one which Asma acknowledges when the author writes, "The monster is a beneficial foe, helping us to virtually represent the obstacles that real life will surely send our way" (293). A way of interpreting this is by recognizing monsters as a stand-in for hurdles in our lives that we compare to our own humanity. Reassuring ourselves that we are normal is a coping mechanism, and monster theory also states that another way of coping with potential flaws is by placing all irregularities on one monster.

Another key tenet of what monsters are is defined by Beal, who uses Sigmund Freud's idea of unheimlich, or the inability to feel at home. Beal writes, "Monsters are personifications of the unheimlich. They stand for what endangers one's sense of at-homeness, that is, one's sense of security, stability, integrity, well-being, health, and meaning" (297-298). This is a way of saying that monsters contradict everything that makes us feel safe and stable. Monsters may appear to us in countless situations, but we never truly get over how uncomfortable they make us feel. Monsters are strikingly inhuman most of the time, and this reassures us that we are human in comparison. But this begs the question of how monsters fit into crime and crime fiction.

Monsters appear quite commonly in crime fiction. We often perceive fictional criminals as monsters, since they reject everything we hold dear in a civilized society. By applying monster theory to crime fiction, we can reassure ourselves of our faith in the criminal justice system. Chigurh, of course, breaks this faith in law enforcement by managing to evade them, as they are portrayed as helpless to stop the chain of events in the novel. As is typical in crime narratives, our faith in criminal justice and punishment is jeopardized because of this. In an article on the ineffectiveness of police leadership, Simmons-Beauchamp and Sharpe argue, "The internal divide sustains the Eurocentric, male-dominated perspectives as police organizations are not typically reflective of the communities they serve" (1). The barrier this speaks of is the "us vs. them" mentality, which allows for police leadership to be perceived as helpless.

This ineffectiveness of the law is made more apparent by McCarthy only being able to provide details about how things used to be. Our expectation that monsters take advantage of the weakness of ordinary people to be dealt justice, a typical aspect of crime fiction, is subverted by McCarthy's thesis that criminals can get away with what they intend to do. Through Chigurh, McCarthy also makes a statement about the growing violence of crime in America and our desensitization towards it. Sheriff Bell laments the time when his father was a man of the law and didn't even

need to carry a gun, but those times seem to be gone in the novel. At the end of the novel, Bell retires, essentially giving up on punishing the monster in this story. By retiring, the sheriff represents how the old ways he's depended on in the past do not work any longer; this is not a country for old men. Near the end of the novel, Bell has a conversation with his friend Ellis. He talks about the nostalgia he has for the old days when things were simpler. Ellis, however, speaks to the fact that it's not one person's job to fix the world and rid it of evil as Bell had hoped, and that there have always been monstrous criminals such as Chigurh. He also reiterates that the good old days are based on Bell's nostalgia and perception of the time rather than actual fact.

Monster theory has been established thus far in terms of how we define it and the shapes it takes. We have also determined why this is useful for us. The question remains how this relates to the monster of *No Country For Old Men*, Chigurh, and how this helps us better understand crime fiction. Moss is hunted ruthlessly by Chigurh, who is also in his own way a symbol of the law of the new world or lack thereof. Chigurh neatly fits into the definition of a monster in many respects, but he also has many human moments in which he becomes even more terrifying to us.

McCarthy's characters, particularly Bell, lament the time when law enforcement had an easier time on the job, saying, "Even when I say anything about how the world is going hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I'm gettin' old" (196). This is an explanation of McCarthy's very concerns for civilized society. It is because of monsters like Chigurh that this long-lost, old way of life is unachievable when the novel's events take place. The change from civilization to the onset of anarchy seems to have taken place when people abandoned the rules which held society together in old times, allowing monsters to gain power and prominence. This also aligns with what McCarthy is saying about breaking the pre-established rules of a cohesive society in general and how monsters influence how violent crime can become. Commentary on crime fiction such as this paints a grim picture of violence in America and how monsters represent that sort of violence. Of course, more can be said about this violence and its significance.

The brutal world Chigurh inhabits is one which is made for a monster like him. Society's fear of violent crime is personified through Chigurh, who also manages to break many of the expectations for crime fiction villains and monsters in general. Chigurh spends the novel hunting Moss and tormenting Bell, and even the law cannot prevent the world from sliding into anarchy. This is a concerning message for those who respect the law. The old world that Bell mourns for is long dead in *No Country For Old Men*. However, it is in this world that criminals like Chigurh, who is immediately portrayed as a giant and cunning man, thrive. Favero writes of

this brutal world that exists in the novel: "The world Bell must confront is one to which Chigurh has already assimilated. It is materialistic, nihilistic, deterministic, mechanistic, and neoliberal, and Chigurh has risen to its challenges to become successful in his line of work" (159). Through this, we learn that the world Ed Tom Bell started his career in has changed for the worse, and only those who can adapt will be able to survive it. It is also implied that only those who are truly evil are capable of assimilating into this world so hostile to old men like Bell.

This all is an incredibly grim statement about what we can expect from the heroes of our typical stories. The idea of evil triumphing over good is reinforced when in the novel Bell says, "[i]t takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people can't be governed at all" (McCarthy 64). Through this, McCarthy lays out what he thinks of good and evil. Chigurh obviously falls into the category of evil, which fits the trope of the villainous criminal. Nevertheless, it's Chigurh's triumph over Bell and the law as a whole that makes him different from this trope. A monster theory view of this problem would say that this is a product of our culture's fears of a monster that cannot be vanquished or easily removed from society, and this creates problems for the resolutions we expect in crime fiction. There is even more to be said about the monster theory view of crime and how one becomes the monster capable of these sorts of acts.

Chigurh has many monstrous moments in the novel, such as when he kills Moss's wife, Carla Jean, for seemingly no reason. Upon returning from the funeral of her mother, she finds Chigurh in her house and instantly knows why. Even Carla Jean herself says that there is no reason for her to have to die, but Chigurh shoots her anyway to fulfill the promise he made to her husband that he would kill her. The section in which she is killed is narrated omnisciently at first before returning to the perspective of Bell, who has his own reaction to the horrific coldness of it. Of course, to assume that Chigurh is without any humanity is not only wrong but runs contrary to McCarthy's message. Chigurh has many surprisingly human moments in the novel. Even the way he rummages through the fridge for milk at Moss's house after barging in to search for him is incredibly human and almost childlike; there are several instances in which this is done. This all makes him even more terrifying because it suggests that even the most monstrous characters are essentially human. It also opens the question of what it takes for someone human to become such a monster.

McCarthy gives almost no details on Chigurh's past, leaving this incredibly important question decidedly ambiguous. One of his more human moments is revealed by forcing his victims to reflect on the nature of life and death. Phipps writes of this very introspection, "The novel lends itself well to philosophical and theological questions about life and death since its main antagonist, Anton Chigurh,

forces many of his victims to take up introspective reflection even as he dispenses death with cold ruthlessness" (38). In other words, there is an inherent contradiction in how Chigurh acts when killing people. On the one hand, he is utterly brutal and without conscience, but on the other, he also sees it as being necessary to force his victims to reflect psychologically. In the text, when considering what he needs to do to survive the people hunting him after hiding the money he took, Moss thinks to himself, "[b]y the time he got up he knew he was probably going to have to kill somebody. He just didn't know who it was" (McCarthy 87). This is significant because it shows that Moss must resort to acts he doesn't want to do just to survive. The question becomes whether Chigurh started on a similar path. The sparse details of Chigurh's past leave open the possibility that he started off in a similar situation compared to Moss, slowly doing more and more criminal things just to survive. By looking at this through the monster theory lens, we can attempt to unlock how monsters come about and what their synthesis is. Still, matters are further complicated by the role fate has in Chigurh's killings.

Chigurh uses coin-flipping to decide the fate of his victims, which is a playful spin on the cold-blooded murder he specializes in. This also gives the reader the impression that Chigurh is a dispatcher of justice. Our expectation for justice to be served by the good guys of the crime narrative is again subverted in this way because Chigurh serving his own cruel form of justice displays a law of the land that relies on violence as a means to an end. Moreover, the use of coin-flipping makes this all seem arbitrary and tragic to McCarthy's audience. Mangrum writes of the tragic nature of "justice" in *No Country For Old Men*, saying, "McCarthy's characters are subject to the tragic tension between aspiring for justice and the absence of the good, searching for the real and misunderstanding the presence of the transcendent because of the inherent limits of their world" (108). In other words, the author is elaborating on how the absence of justice is just another form of the new law of the land that is present in McCarthy's novel. The bleakness of *No Country For Old Men* allows for a statement on the primal nature of justice when evil individuals take the law into their own hands. Also present is the idea that even if Carla Jean were to survive Chigurh by correctly calling the coin toss, it would have simply been someone else's turn to die on perhaps a different day or under other circumstances. This approach towards chance and determining who gets to live or die is certainly befitting of a monster. The arbitrary nature of crime in the novel is a way of saying that it is pointless to try to stop it.

Chigurh also differs from typical monsters in crime narratives where the villain is caught in the end, because he escapes. After killing Carla Jean, he is involved in a vehicle collision while driving and breaks his arm. He pays a boy to give him his

shirt to use as a sling and gets away before the police arrive. Ultimately, by evading capture and justice at the novel's conclusion, *No Country For Old Men* contradicts the traditional crime narrative where the villainous monster is captured. The significance of Chigurh remaining free is that we are never truly safe from monsters. Chigurh remains uncaptured to presumably commit more horrendous crimes, and this breaks many traditions of crime narratives where it is expected that the bad guy will be foiled in the end. The expectation that the culprit is busted at the end of the crime narrative reassures us that violent criminals can never succeed.

Figure 1. Film capture of Anton Chigurh in the movie adaption of No Country for Old Men, *2007.*

Through an incredibly austere view of justice and crime, *No Country For Old Men* presents a world where evil and monsters are allowed to reign. This world is one in which old men like Sheriff Bell cannot hope to survive like in the days of yore. The villain Chigurh, by constantly subverting our expectations for crime narratives in the novel, represents the new law of the land over which he presides in a terrifyingly bleak commentary about the state of anarchy and justice. Chigurh

is truly monstrous in the way he plays with his victims and takes pleasure in hunting people down, allowing us to get a glimpse of McCarthy's grim perspective on monstrous criminals. While it is important to make the distinction that not all criminals are inherently monsters, monsters often happen to be horrible criminals in how they break the expected rules of society. Monster theory is thus shown as being present in *No Country For Old Men* via Chigurh. With Moss's death and Chigurh escaping to presumably commit more crimes at the novel's conclusion, McCarthy is suggesting that lawlessness will prevail because of monsters like Chigurh; moreover, the good guys such as Bell don't have a chance to stop the bad guys by holding to the old ways. Not only is this a serious departure from what is anticipated in crime stories, but it also is symptomatic of a general shift in our perception of the trust we place in law enforcement to protect us from this state of anarchy described in the novel. Via analysis from the lens of a monster theory perspective, it becomes clear that Chigurh's monstrosity provides commentary for how we analyze criminals. At the end of the day, McCarthy suggests that we will never be truly safe from these kinds of monsters and that trying to rid the world of them is futile.

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