

Cormac McCarthy in Style and Content

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The University of Notre Dame's de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture is holding its 23rd annual Fall Conference this week. "Child of God: Personhood in Cormac McCarthy" is one of the first day's colloquies. The title alludes to a 1973 novel about a young homicidal vagabond, an Appalachian serial killer. Its violence and specificity make it an unusual topic among opening liturgies and pro-life panels; no other writer received a dedicated panel, academics and philosophers inclusive.

RealClearPolitics held its second-ever "Books & Culture Symposium" during the week of McCarthy's death, publishing three essays about the author and redistributing at least a dozen more that *First Things* and *The American Conservative* printed in his honor. Even Nick Land, the notorious founder of "neoreaction," has taken to calling McCarthy's work "scripture." Mainstream newspapers and art journals released tributes, but some major journals at the other end of the spectrum, which normally comment on culture, were mostly silent. A political bias against recognizing McCarthy may seem puzzling: despite the critical popularity of his work, McCarthy was barely even a public figure, let alone a political one. He infamously lived in seclusion, and declined almost every interview request across his 58 years as a writer. Why do some conservatives show warmth to McCarthy, and some progressives do not?

Why does McCarthy receive special attention among conservatives? We can approach this question in its first principles: the form and content of the work itself. McCarthy has a classical style of narrative conflicts, and his letters insist on submitting human characters to chthonic metaphysical forces.

Rarely do McCarthy's characters express the Christian virtues normally associated with conservative literary heroes such as Dostoevsky and Tolkien. Actors of good are hard to come by, frequently finding themselves vexed by fate. His most iconic characters are his villains. Anton Chigurh and Judge Holden, his two most well-known, seem to wash up naturally from the setting, like artifacts from some lost civilization.

Modern novels tend to eschew man-versus-man as a mode of literary conflict, preferring to depict man against society, or against himself. When major, named antagonists do exist in modern novels, they are either distant and absent (Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* opposes Marlow not in a literal, but rather in a psychological or moral way), are an impersonal face for a large-scale conflict (Sauron, Big Brother), or are aggressively characterized as nuanced and multifaceted victims of circumstance. By writing about dynamic and personal villains who nonetheless embody evil, McCarthy chooses a method of literary conflict that feels more traditional, hearkening back to Goethe and Shakespeare. The words and actions of McCarthy's evildoers contribute most heavily to his story's thematic keys, rather than those of his protagonists. They often give extended monologues defining the philosophy of the novel, as Mephistopheles or Shylock would. This is not to say that his other characters are passive—they tend to be virile, blue-collar heroes—but that characters possess theodic parameters. Heroes and villains respond to each other but also to God, a triangular approach to characterization from which McCarthy bares his own theology.

Opaque passages from *No Country for Old Men* serve as an illustration of both this triangular relationship, and the antique principles McCarthy applies to the substance of his novels. Sitting in the office of a Houston drug kingpin, the professional assassin Carson Wells is tasked with cleaning up after our more brutal and erratic villain, Anton Chigurh. Accepting the mission, he asks one last question:

"Can I ask you something?"

Sure.

I couldn't come back up in that elevator, could I?

Not to this floor. Why?

I was just interested. Security. Always interesting.

It recodes itself after every trip. A randomly generated five digit number. It doesn't print out anywhere. I dial a number and it reads the code back over the phone. I give it to you and you punch it in. Does that answer your question?

Nice.

Yes.

I counted the floors from the street.

And?

There's a floor missing.

I'll have to look into it.

Wells smiled."

Written as a classical gunslinger, Wells is cocky, but levelheaded and capable. As he approaches the building where his meeting takes place, he is thinking of security, floorplans, entrances, and exits. He smugly gleans that the building has more floors than the elevator does. He accounts for everything except for the unaccountable, symbolized by the 'missing floor' beneath his feet. This is almost certainly the building's thirteenth floor; to "skip it" for superstitious reasons is a common tradition, especially in the American West. Wells is not "unprepared" in a mundane way; he is remarkably careful and perceptive. Instead, superstition seems to be something Wells hasn't even heard of; it never crossed his mind the way it has the humble civilian. By placing so much trust in his own skill and preparation, Wells appears completely ignorant of chaos as a principle, and the force with which raw misfortune can sweep him off the table. Wells has a deterministic worldview—and he can determine it. This makes him easy prey for Chigurh (hand-of-fate, par excellence).

Compare this with the attitude of our villain, who famously flips coins to decide whether those he encounters live or die:

"You know what the date is on this coin?"

No.

It's nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it.

I don't know what it is I stand to win.

In the blue light the man's face was beaded thinly with sweat. He licked his upper lip.

You stand to win everything, Chigurh said. Everything."

McCarthy uses the character of Carson Wells against a villain to contrast approaches to fate and chance. Like Chigurh, he is a seasoned killer; but unlike him, Wells believes in the predictability of fate, and the triumph of human order. Later in the novel, Chigurh makes short work of him, posing as a civilian for an excruciating ambush:

"Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down the wall behind him. His mother's face, his First Communion, women he had known. The faces of men as they died on their knees

before him.”

Carson Wells dies in fear, ferocious prose emphasizing the futility of his self-assuredness and reason. He is overwhelmed and underequipped for Chigurh, the archon of this world, a world of Heracleitan fire. Change and oblivion loom over it, the only earthly certainties. It shares the trancelike savagery that immortalizes *Daniel* and *Revelation*. Even Chigurh is later maimed completely at random, when intoxicated teenagers run a stop sign. It's an effective reminder of nature's authority over her own enforcers.

Overall, primitivism in form and content makes McCarthy resonate with the right across its many fringes. His composition is archaic and terrifying. The men are rugged, the villains ruthless, the conflicts brutal and direct. The proud are brought low, and princes made to wander in a trackless waste. Mankind is portrayed as weary and troubled, causing many to accuse the provincial writer of nihilism. This doesn't square with an unmistakable sense of the sublime, something that causes more sophisticated critics to compare his work to the Old Testament. Humans are presented through their most basic elements, and without God. The stages he sets are desperate and cruel, but also rostrums from which to plead forgiveness.

This was the style of “America's Prophet,” her last great writer, who reanimated the forgotten provinces. Across twelve novels, Cormac McCarthy decorated the crumbling South and windswept West with sleek and original characters, who embody the spirit of these territories without resorting to revanchism or hokey nostalgia. His gaze draws across these landscapes with love, spotting ospreys and limping steppewolves, humming with space and the thrill of providential conquest. Underneath it all, nature is our central character; in his few interviews, he could not help but rove about the native flora. The outrageous poverty he conducted, such as washing in rivers or sleeping in stone hovels and old barns, was more than a practice of discipline, but in context, was a way to rest closer to the heart of his beloved America.

McCarthy was not only good, but *great*, and delivered aesthetic marvels to his jaded modern country. They are as sinister as they are glorious. He contributes positively to the Western canon when it is under duress, and is a bridge to the highest hope.