Crystal Carney
English 482 – Major Figures – Cormac McCarthy
Dr. Aaron Cloyd
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Free Will as it Defines Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Novels

Cormac McCarthy's characters demonstrate an ongoing discussion about free will and how mankind is led to make the choices it does in extreme circumstances. Further, McCarthy invites the reader to question how those choices define an individual's life and its value. To explore the way McCarthy defines free will, fate, and the resulting morality in his novels, I will focus on the character development of Anton Chigurh and Llewelyn Moss in No Country For Old Men, The Kid and the Judge in Blood Meridian, and John Grady Cole's discussions with Duena Alfonsa in All the Pretty Horses. Cormac McCarthy's parataxis writing style throughout all three novels lends itself to the same discussion of free will and morality, impartially stating events and making observations, as if to serve as a neutral party. Because of this apparent neutrality, the reader is forced to draw their own conclusions about the motivations of the characters, what their perceived place in society is, and what this means for the rest of the story.

The role this ambiguity plays in the novels is most apparent in McCarthy's characters who often find themselves in opposition to the protagonists by their own choices or by chance meeting. Keeping with the theme of neutrality, McCarthy portrays these characters often as merely different perspectives, rather than traditional antagonists. In examining some of these instances where a character struggles with free will throughout McCarthy's work, and the close connections the novels have to one another, a clearer picture of McCarthy's depiction of free will is made apparent and gives the reader a greater sense of character motivations and depth. Understanding these motivations can lead to discovery of what the novel's underlying subject matter may be, subtle tensions, and a lasting message McCarthy leaves his readers with at the end of the stories. McCarthy seems to wrestle with the idea that mankind has the freedom to determine the course of their own lives. He portrays situations completely out of the control of his characters, and yet leads his writing back to the idea that the perceived "fate" or lack of control over a situation is merely the result of a choice willingly made by the character in question long before the situation they find themselves in. Every piece and moment of McCarthy's characters' lives is significant and determines their fate.

In Blood Meridian, the reader is presented with a dynamic between the Judge and the Kid, in which the Judge wields his implied authority and intellect, and the Kid has to decide whether he will obey or not. This dynamic is never stated explicitly and is challenged throughout the novel in subtle ways, manifesting in the social dynamic of the group they travel with and those they come into contact with throughout their journey. The men in the world of Blood Meridian are merciless and violent, often striking out against those portrayed as innocent bystanders. Of course, the reader has to question whether there is any such thing as true innocence in this bloody world, and whether these bystanders are at the mercy of their own choices in such a volatile environment.

The idea that the Kid never had a childhood allows room to question whether his character is governed more as an adult by his inherent nature; rather than what little nurturing he received from his father. The answer to this question could determine the Kid's motivations throughout the rest of the novel, though it seems far removed from the violent situations he finds

himself in. If he is making decisions based on his inherent nature, it would seem that the Kid is then a victim of fate, and every decision he's made serves his whims and ideas about what is right and what is wrong. The reader is then placed in the position of trying to determine whether the inherent nature of the Kid is compassionate, cruel, or indifferent. Judging by his actions, it is difficult to speculate about how he may feel in given situations. Sometimes he is violent and destructive for no reason the reader can find, and at other times, he shows mercy to his fellows not demonstrated by the rest of the company he rides with. This apparent neutrality makes the Kid a perfect contrast to the normalcy of the community he travels with. It is through this contrast that the reader is able to make moral determinations about the Judge's actions, as well as those he rides with.

If, on the other hand, the Kid is only acting out of a sense of perpetuating his own normalcy taught to him during his violent and unpleasant childhood, his actions are less a result of choices he makes freely, and instead a product of his upbringing. If he then has little control over his actions, he is a character not unlike the other characters depicted as amoral and unpredictable. His character begins to lack autonomy in the eyes of the reader, and the idea of a moral compass is less important than tradition and authority. This would explain his more or less obedient actions when first traveling with Captain White and the Judge, as well as his value of trade and hard work, both honorable traits, as he demonstrates in the bar when he offers to work for a drink. The reader sees another example of honor present in the kid when Tobin urges him to shoot the unarmed Judge when he has the chance to. That the Kid does not, and chooses to wait until the Judge is armed demonstrates an unspoken honor or moral code that prevents him from killing a defenseless man. (300) These choices the Kid makes throughout the novel are a reflection of his moral compass and give the reader insight into how he might make sense of the violent world around him.

When the Kid begins to travel with the Judge, the reader is able to see that the Judge is a very different kind of man from every other character in the book. Rather than finding himself in violent situations like the other characters in the novel, the Judge seems to create those violent situations, reveling in them where others feel obligation. His celebration of this violence highlights his mental instability and his superior intelligence. Because of this intelligence and unpredictable and violent nature, the other men look to him as an authority figure, cautiously obeying his orders and deferring to his judgment, as they would (and had previously) a preacher in a church. This twisted representation and distinct absence of holy men throughout the novel also suggests that the holy men who are present do not have the favor of a higher power; which may or may not be present. This loss of favor allows them to be replaced by questionable men who rule by their own questionable morals and motivations, oftentimes to the downfall of those around them. When the Kid and Sproule come upon the massacred Mexican village, for example, they find a church full of murdered people who had been seeking shelter from their attackers. (McCarthy 63) This is one of many examples throughout the novel that emphasizes that the church does not have the power that the faithful hope for. The fates of those who choose to place their faith in the church seem fairly predictable as over and over again the reader encounters characters who speak highly of God, only to be killed or otherwise doomed. These men, like the Judge, who act as a kind of divine authority, appear to have curried the favor of the absent higher power and claimed the vacant positions with this hypothetical favor. The Judge, as one such character, fills the authoritative and moral vacancy in the eyes of the village people after holy men such as Preacher Green are displaced. (McCarthy 7) As the story goes on however, the novel challenges these men and their "favor" by drawing the reader to characters

like the Kid who make their own choices, morally free from these corrupt powers and repeating pattern. The Kid is instructed to kill his fellows who are too injured to go on with the company, but rather than obey the Judge's authority, he chooses to listen to the men and grant them power over their own deaths instead. (217) This depiction of the "lawless" or "amoral" authoritative figures and community, agrees with the disassociated narrative and makes the reader question again and again whether the characters are products of conditions outside their control or are instead forging their own versions of who they want to be.

In All the Pretty Horses, John Grady Cole encounters first Alejandra's great aunt, Duena Alfonsa, and then the crime boss, Emilio Perez, in prison, both of whom question what it means to make a choice, testing his resolve. Cole stubbornly rejects the defined choices offered to him by both Alfonsa and Perez, though this refusal only serves to prove their definitions correct to some extent. Duena Alfonsa defines Cole's choices as playing into the hands of fate; Alfonsa sees their free will as a series of actions that decide one's fate. (Shaw) These actions, however, are predetermined by human nature or a higher power; according to Alfonsa, "It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don't believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change." In this same conversation, Cole denies Alfonsa's definition of free will and defines it instead as a means of controlling his fate. (Shaw) This definition expresses an idealism and romantic outlook on his life; a level of control that Cole tries to keep throughout the novel.

This outlook is put to the test when Cole is imprisoned with Lacey Rawlins and meets Emilio Perez; who tries to strike a deal with them that would determine their place in the prison society, and give Perez power over him. Cole denies this offer, seeing it as further imprisonment, this time from his own free will. Cole seems to see the possibility of fate in the world around him, and oftentimes finds himself powerless to the authority of another, as is the case with Alfonsa and Perez, but also deliberately chooses his own actions whenever the opportunity arises. Whether this is out of stubbornness or moral righteousness is unclear but what is clear are Cole's actions that lead him in pursuit of a set of ideals through the desert and away from his friends. Alfonsa saw this idealism in Cole, warning him that, "The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting."

In No Country For Old Men, both Llewelyn Moss and Sheriff John Bell are haunted by Anton Chigurh, who is depicted as the embodiment of chance. The idea of free will is most apparent in the character of Chigurh. That he uses a coin to decide his own actions could be seen both as the presence of free will and the absence of it simultaneously. For example, when Chigurh goes into the filling station and talks to the proprietor, the reader is able to notice when Chigurh's thoughts have turned to violence, though they are not explicitly stated. The proprietor, ignorant of the dangerous man in front of him, seems to tempt the murderous actions the reader has witnessed and the reader has no reason to doubt a violent conclusion. Instead, Chigurh surprises the reader, and maybe himself, when he flips a coin, leaving the proprietor's life to chance. Chigurh talks about instruments and asks the proprietor what a coin could be an instrument of. The allusion to choice is heavy in his analogy, though it is unclear whether Chigurh believes that the choice is already made when a person reaches the time of the choice, or if it is a presentation of free will for those able to see it. According to Jay Ellis in his article "Do You See? Elliptic Levels in No Country for Old Men", this ability to see their own free will is what Chigurh may be trying to reveal to his victims before their deaths. Ellis states that,

> "Anton Chigurh is more complex than just a figure of pure evil… Chigurh functions not only as an executioner, but also as a Socratic figure who, when he has time, engages in extended dialogue intended to help his victims see what they could not before see, that their past actions, in conjunction with past events, have determined their fated end at his hands. Whether their deaths are 'just' is not the point… Ironically, in their most powerless moment they may see at least this: ... Death or escape: either eventuality derived in part from the victim's own agency accomplishing what we might later call fate, even as both remain in part related to chance."

Ellis goes on to say that Chigurh may be helping his victims to "see" in a more literal sense: "Assuming Chigurh must kill the man he looks at, we must note that he helps him: the man dies with courage, in that he faces - he "looks" at - his death, and we may imagine that he therefore accepts it; Chigurh helps this victim by exercising the patience to teach, or more precisely to reveal." This last action of convincing his victims to look, before enacting the inevitable murder, shows the reader a glimpse of the moral code a man like Chigurh might follow. The cruel possibility of hope in this coin flip, and Chigurh's efforts to place some of the responsibility for his victim's deaths on themselves is the perfect representation of a choice taken away from the individuals involved; a distinct lack of the victim's free will. The coin toss is impartial and unbiased to a given situation. However, the meaning Chigurh attaches to the coin flip is a standing judgement for any person he feels he is in a position to judge, and at the same time also a choice Chigurh has made before even meeting some of his victims for the first time. In Chigurh's seemingly chaotic coin flip we can see Duena Alfonso's words enacted:

> "My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things… The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz. No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes… Sometimes I think we are all like that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making."

Showing many facets of the question of autonomy, McCarthy lets his characters explain in their own words their separate ideas of free will and what it means to them. These separate ideas coexist throughout McCarthy's novels and none seem to be proven infallible or otherwise preferred in the progression of events. Llewelyn Moss is dogged by the killer Chigurh for the length of the novel because of a decision he made in the beginning of it. After long days of running, he explains to a hitchhiker he pick up on the road that his choices are in some ways not his own. Moss knew when he decided to take the money that his life would be in danger and he would be forced to continue making decisions regarding his pursuers if he wanted to remain alive. Every action he has taken since that initial choice have led him to the motel where he reflects on his life's recent events. Moss tells the girl, "Three weeks ago I was a law abidin citizen. Workin a nine to five job. Eight to four, anyways. Things happen to you they happen. They don't ask first. They don't require your permission."(McCarthy 220) There's a bitterness in Moss' statement here, tinged with resignation as he remembers his life before finding the case full of money. He seems to be mentoring the younger girl, warning her about the dangers of an arbitrary decision. He gives her money and advises her to stay in a motel and ride the bus to get around, as hitchhiking is dangerous. Moss seems to drive this point home by stating that, "Most people'll run from their own mother to get to hug death by the neck. They can't wait to see him."

(McCarthy 234) The girl says she isn't afraid of him, though Moss is resigned to die because of the choices he's made, and she is also a part of them now.

His apparent lack of foresight throughout the novel is similar to that of Chigurh's manner of dealing with the people he is in contact with. Both characters have made a singular choice that forced nearly all of the following choices of their lives. For Moss, it was taking the money, knowing there would be someone looking for it and that he would be in danger. For Chigurh, his choice is to leave the fate of his victims up to the assigned meaning in a coin flip. The optimism and perhaps naivete of the girl is apparent as she suggests that Moss still has free will and has the ability to make his own choices to save himself from the terrible situation he's gotten himself into. Moss rejects this idea, resigned and committed to his own definition of what free will he may or may not have.

Sheriff Bell likewise explains to the reader in his many monologues how he sees the world, and what has shaped that view. Throughout the novel he is shadowing Chigurh, moving through the same spaces, but in a different manner, noticing details Chigurh missed, interpreting them in a subtly familiar way that leads him to similar conclusions as Chigurh. Whether this is a sympathetic connection Bell might have with Chigurh isn't fully explored in the text, but the reader can see from their actions that both methods yield similar results, getting them both nearer in their pursuit of Moss. According to Jay Ellis, the way the men examine the same spaces is visually apparent in the movie adaptation of the novel. Ellis points out that,

> "... the inclusion of a television screen as mirror, especially as the Coens later show us Bell sitting in the same position… suggests not only a male contest for power through seeing, but also… suggestions that these characters need not be read merely as constructions of psychology (let alone only in terms of gender).

This difference in investigative approach is as if to show the reader that their perspectives determine the choices they make, explaining their similar actions, while highlighting their very different philosophies and moral compasses they apply in their everyday lives.

Are the novels and their depictions of free will connected? There are certainly similarities. The Judge and Anton Chigurh both show a cold calculation toward their victims yet seem to decide arbitrarily upon their actions in the moment, relying on some kind of fate to intervene and allow the "correct" action to take place. They both act as though what they are doing is morally better than the way most people conduct themselves and make decisions in the world. Both make the reader question their motives and whether they are acting on behalf of some other force, or of their own volition. Despite their differences in how they handle the repercussions of their actions, Cole and Moss are in some ways similar for their belief in their own free will and ability to shape their own destiny. These comparisons give us a more complete picture of how free will, or lack thereof, governs and torments the characters McCarthy writes about, and any possible underlying message in the text. McCarthy's characters are making decisions of their own free will that determines their fates, but also reflect the values they hold. On the subject of free will, Shaw states that, "we must act as if we are [in control over our lives]. and we must accept that we may not be able to control our own fate. The idea that we determine our fate, but do not control it, is central to [All the Pretty Horses] and is perhaps the healthiest outlook on life." By this understanding and demonstration of hope in the midst of such hardship in McCarthy's enigmatic novels, the reader is able to apply this outlook through their own lens, better understanding their own lives, and that those of others, for it.

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