

No Country for Old Men (2007)

“I got it under control.”

Major Credits:

Director: Joel & Ethan Coen

Screenplay: Joel & Ethan Coen; adapted from the novel by Cormac McCarthy

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes (pseudonym for Joel & Ethan Coen)

Cast: Tommy Lee Jones (Sheriff Ed Tom Bell), Javier Bardem (Anton Chigurh), Josh Brolin (Llewelyn Moss, Woody Harrelson (Carson Wells), Kelly Macdonald (Carla Jean Moss)

Background:

No Country for Old Men marks a return to the regionally inflected, ultra-violent crime dramas that made the Coen brothers icons of independent filmmaking with *Blood Simple* (1984), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), and the Oscar-winning *Fargo* (1996). Critical praise for the film was nearly unanimous, with reviewers praising the taut storytelling, creepy suspense, dark wit, memorable dialogue (much of which is quoted verbatim from McCarthy's novel), and compelling performances.

The overall feeling of the film vacillates between recognizable movie genres—the Western (Sheriff Bell seems to have stepped out of *High Noon*; Anton Chigurh is the most implacable villain since Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*), the crime thriller (the plot may remind some of *A Simple Plan*, the suitcase full of money recalls *Pulp Fiction*)—and classical epic, with Bell playing the Chorus and Chigurh The Furies. The indeterminate ending, which mystifies or infuriates many viewers (and faithfully follows the novel), suggests the shaggy dog tale quality of the Coen brothers' own *The Big Lebowski* (1998).

Cinematic Qualities:

My own term for the film's style is “Tex-Mex Film Noir.” Beginning with Sheriff Ed Tom Bell's opening voiceover (“I don't know what to make of that.”) and the silence of the arid, threatening landscape Llewelyn surveys, the Coens sustain an ominous vision of a world beyond human comprehension or control. No wonder Bell acknowledges near the end, “I feel overmatched.”

Compared to the most recent Coen brothers' films, *No Country for Old Men* eschews flashy directorial moves, relying instead on the nuanced, laconic dialogue (“Is Carson Wells there?” “Not in the sense you mean.”), idiosyncratic props (cattle gun, transponder), and telling gestures (Chigurh propping his legs on the bed to avoid some spilling blood).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Because of the mythic qualities of the Western, it may be easy to overlook that this film is an historical narrative. What artistic purpose is served by setting the tale in 1980?
2. Several key events, such as the much anticipated confrontation between Chigurh and Moss, take place off-screen. After establishing no many generic details, why does the film willfully withhold a conventional climax?
3. As represented by the four major male characters as well as the landscape, southwest Texas comes to stand for a mindset as much as a geographical place, as in *Chinatown*. How would you describe the world view constructed within the film?
4. Although nearly all reviewers concede that the Coen brothers have created a beautifully constructed film, several of them openly wonder whether *No Country for Old Men* is actually *about* anything. The New York Times book reviewer described Mc Carthy's novel as "sinister high hokum." Does a similar response to the movie, in effect, damn it with faint praise?