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Scott A. Singleton

Kennesaw State University, ssingle6@gmail.com

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The Action of Grace in Territory Held by the Devil: Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy

Scott A. Singleton
Kennesaw State University

ABSTRACT

This paper compares the lives and work of Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy. The two authors share similarities in their backgrounds, careers, and work. The paper begins with an examination of biographical information of both authors to contextualize their work and note commonalities in their lives and careers. The central idea is that Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy both create grotesque characters to reveal the depraved condition of humanity in order to highlight the need for redemption and the possibility of divine grace. To prove this, examples are discussed from multiple pieces of work by O'Connor and McCarthy including *The Misfit*, from O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and Anton Chigurh, from McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Following this is a review of the visual presentation of *No Country for Old Men* through the Coen brothers' film adaptation of the novel.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Southern literature, Coen brothers, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, No Country for Old Men, grotesque, Southern Gothic, grace, depravity.

Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy share many similarities in their lives and their work. Both authors grew up as Roman Catholics in the American South, and this background heavily influenced their writing. In addition to biographical parallels, they focus on similar themes in their work. Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy both create grotesque characters to reveal the depraved condition of humanity in order to highlight the need for redemption and the possibility of divine grace. In her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor develops a depraved killer, The Misfit, who parallels McCarthy's antagonist, Anton Chigurh, from his novel *No Country for Old Men*. Additionally, the Coen brothers' successful film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* visually presents the themes of fate, death, instinct, and reality that O'Connor and McCarthy develop through their writing.

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925. O'Connor lived in Savannah for the first twelve years of her life. Although she rarely commented on her childhood in Savannah, the experience had a profound impact on her life and work. In one of her lectures, O'Connor says that "anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him for the rest of his days" (*Mystery and Manners* [MM] 84). Flannery O'Connor was born into a middle class Roman Catholic family with Irish heritage on both sides. Peter Cline, O'Connor's great grandfather, immigrated to the United States in 1845 directly from Ireland to teach Latin (Cash 6). O'Connor's Irish heritage can also be traced to John Flannery, who emigrated from Ireland to the United States in 1851. The O'Connor side of the family can be traced to a pair of brothers who came from Ireland directly to Savannah after the Civil War (Cash 7).

O'Connor's father, Edward O'Connor, was a struggling businessman when Flannery was born. Savannah, although now a successful port city, was in a state of economic decline in 1925. Jean Cash writes that in the 1920s, "Savannah had few factories, no major industries, and little tourism" (2). The declining state of Savannah's economy only deteriorated more as the country entered the Great Depression. Despite the financial difficulties of the O'Connors', Flannery did not grow up in poverty. Edward O'Connor did encounter many failures in his business endeavors; however, he always made enough to support his family and send Flannery to Catholic school.

Regina Cline and Edward O'Connor met in 1922, both at the age of twenty-six (Gooch 23). Despite Regina's concerns over Edward's poor social status in Savannah, they married within the year. Both Regina and Edward struggled over past failed relationships, including Regina's heartache over a failed relationship with a young man from Milledgeville because of his Protestant beliefs (Gooch 23). Regina and Edward O'Connor both came from Roman Catholic backgrounds, and they raised Flannery in a strong Roman Catholic community in Savannah. From an early age, Flannery developed a devout Catholic belief and never wavered from this belief during her life.

Edward O'Connor landed a job in real estate in Atlanta in 1938. Regina and Flannery followed him there for a brief period but eventually moved to the Cline family estate in Milledgeville. With the exception of the five years Flannery would spend in the North, Milledgeville would remain her home for the rest of her life. Edward O'Connor remained in Atlanta to work, but he came down with lupus and died

in 1941 (Cash 29). Due to the absence of a strong Catholic community in Milledgeville, Regina was forced to enroll Flannery in Peabody High School. After high school, Flannery entered Georgia State College for Women in Milledgeville. O'Connor grew in many ways during her time in college. During her childhood, she was certainly not a recluse, but she did not develop many close friendships. Friends of O'Connor from college remember her for a variety of reasons, and almost all recall her dry humor. Not only did O'Connor develop socially while at Georgia State College for Women, she also started to write. In her first year there, she published a free-verse poem, three essays, and a short story (Cash 59).

Much less information is available concerning Cormac McCarthy's life before college. McCarthy was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933 (Jarrett 1). Four years later, he moved with his mother, Gladys, and his sisters, Barbara and Helen, to join his father in Knoxville, Tennessee. Although few details provide insight into his childhood, it is evident that McCarthy, like O'Connor, gained a significant insight into life through childhood and encountered many ideas, places, and people that would later influence his writing.

The McCarthys moved in 1943 to a housing area southeast of the city of Knoxville called Martin Mill Pike. Robert Jarrett comments on the connection between McCarthy's childhood and his writing when he notes that the house on Martin Mill Pike placed McCarthy in contact with the mountain people of Sevier. In McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, the fictional county of Sevierville is clearly modeled after Sevier County, and many of the characters that McCarthy develops in his novel were undoubtedly modeled after real

encounters with the citizens of Sevier (Jarrett 1).

Cormac McCarthy's father, who was also called Cormac by the family, was a successful businessman who started working in Knoxville for the Tennessee Valley Authority (Jarrett 1). The financial success that the McCarthy family experienced was certainly one of the reasons for their move to the house on Martin Mill Pike; however, this move also indicates a sense of isolation that the McCarthy family encountered (Jarrett 1). The McCarthys, like the O'Connors, were an Irish Catholic family living in the Protestant South. The sense of isolation from the society of the South was likely heightened by the fact that the McCarthys came from the North and did not fit into Southern culture. The isolation from popular society that McCarthy experienced at an early age likely influenced his development into a fiercely private person.

McCarthy graduated from a local Catholic high school in Knoxville in 1951. He immediately enrolled at the University of Tennessee but only lasted a year before leaving the school in 1952 (Jarrett 2). Almost no information is available about McCarthy for a year; however, it is known that McCarthy concluded his year of traveling by enlisting in the Air Force in 1953. McCarthy stayed in the Air Force for four years, two of which he spent in Alaska, where it is rumored he worked for a radio station. Despite the ambiguity behind his role in the Air Force, it is accepted that this is when McCarthy first seriously began reading literature (Jarrett 2).

McCarthy returned to Knoxville after serving in the Air Force and enrolled again in the University of Tennessee. Even though McCarthy restarted his college career by enrolling in the College of Engineering at

the University of Tennessee, he started to write. He published two short stories, "Wake for Susan" and "A Drowning Incident," in the school literary journal, *The Phoenix*, in 1959 and 1960 (Jarrett 2).

Although both Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy began their writing careers by publishing short stories in college, they pursued different paths after leaving college. When O'Connor graduated from Georgia State College for Women in 1945, she immediately enrolled in the State University of Iowa in Iowa City and started her studies in September (Cash 77). At the time, the English department at the University of Iowa was developing a new program in creative writing known as the Iowa Writers Workshop. O'Connor enrolled in the Iowa Writers Workshop under the leadership of the director of the program, Paul Engle. It was in this workshop that O'Connor began to develop the story that would turn into her first novel, *Wise Blood* (Cash 81).

Paul Engle and the students of the Iowa Writers Workshop quickly recognized the talent of O'Connor. Although O'Connor is remembered by most of her fellow students at Iowa as a quiet girl from Georgia with a heavy southern accent, they all acknowledged her tremendous writing skills. One of O'Connor's contemporaries notes that O'Connor "had a way with words" and that "discussions usually centered on what she had to say" (Cash 84).

O'Connor's experience at the University of Iowa greatly influenced her writing and her thoughts on writing. Later in her life, O'Connor gave many lectures on a variety of issues concerning writing, and it is clear through her lectures that her experience in Iowa formed many of her thoughts. In her lecture on "The Nature and

the Aim of Fiction,” O’Connor says that “in every writing class you find people who care nothing about writing, because they think they are already writers by virtue of some experience they’ve had” (MM 85). O’Connor also reacts to the growth of the program at the University of Iowa and the overall increase in popularity of creative writing in colleges when she writes, “In the last twenty years the colleges have been emphasizing creative writing to such an extent that you almost feel that any idiot with a nickel’s worth of talent can emerge from a writing class able to write a competent story” (MM 86).

After O’Connor completed her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa, she applied to Yaddo, the prestigious artist’s colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. O’Connor was immediately accepted to Yaddo and arrived in the summer of 1948 (Gooch 149). Yaddo offered O’Connor a vibrant community of creative artists where she could finish writing her first novel. O’Connor approached the social scene at Yaddo in a similar fashion to how she approached the social scene at Georgia State College for Women and the Iowa Writers Workshop—she generally avoided socializing with most of the students and developed a few close friendships (Gooch 153). Cash notes that “O’Connor apparently disliked the pseudo-sophistication of some of the other guests, most of whom were totally secular in their interests and beliefs” (110). In her lecture on “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” O’Connor claims that “so many people can now write competent stories that the short story as a medium is in danger of dying of competence” (MM 86).

O’Connor did not stay at Yaddo for long. Due to a controversy within the Yaddo community, O’Connor left in 1949 and accepted an invitation to join her friends

Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, also Roman Catholics, in Connecticut. Robert Fitzgerald, a translator of Greek plays and poems, and his wife, Sally, formed a close relationship with O’Connor. However, O’Connor’s stay with the Fitzgeralds was cut short by the shocking discovery that O’Connor had lupus, the same disease that killed her father. The news of the disease forced O’Connor to reluctantly return to her home in Milledgeville. When O’Connor boarded a train from New York to Georgia in December of 1950, she began a period of her life marked by suffering from the disease. O’Connor undoubtedly identified with her protagonist, Hazel Motes, who in the first chapter of *Wise Blood* travels home on a train after fighting a war.

Unlike Flannery O’Connor, Cormac McCarthy left college without ever receiving a degree. In 1961, McCarthy married Lee Holleman, then moved with his wife to New Orleans and worked a variety of manual labor jobs as he continued to work on his first novel (Jarrett 2). McCarthy finished the manuscript for *The Orchard Keeper* and sent it to Random House. It was accepted and published in 1965 to favorable reviews (Jarrett 2). In the summer of 1965, McCarthy used money from a series of grants to begin a period of world traveling that would last for two years. After divorcing his first wife before leaving the country, McCarthy met and married Annie DeLisle, a singer who worked on the ship that transported McCarthy to England (Jarrett 2). The two were quickly married and traveled the world, ending up at the island of Ibiza off the Spanish coast.

McCarthy returned with his wife to the United States in December of 1967. A year later, McCarthy’s second novel, *Outer Dark*, was published to critical acclaim. In 1969, McCarthy ran out of money and once

again worked a variety of odd jobs to make enough money to continue his writing (Jarrett 3). McCarthy finished his third novel, *Child of God*, and it was published in 1973. Despite the continued favorable reviews of McCarthy's novels, they did not sell well, and McCarthy remained largely unknown to the American public.

Interestingly, many of O'Connor's lectures and essays in *Mystery and Manners* speak directly to both the life and work of McCarthy. In the same lecture as previously mentioned, O'Connor states, "It is true, I think, that these are times when the financial rewards for sorry writing are much greater than those for good writing" (MM 65-66). This idea certainly applies to McCarthy's early career. None of McCarthy's first three novels sold more than 2,500 copies in their first printing, despite all the praise and acclaim from critics. O'Connor also experienced a similar situation with the publication of her own work. This sobering truth for authors leads her to conclude that "if you want to write well and live well at the same time, you'd better arrange to inherit money or marry a stockbroker" (MM 66).

McCarthy's life drastically changed on New Year's Eve of 1976 (Jarrett 4). On that evening, McCarthy informed his wife that he was leaving, and he started to pack his truck. Like O'Connor's antagonist from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Tom T. Shiftlet, McCarthy took his wife out to dinner and then left for the open road without her. McCarthy's decision to drive west marks a departure from the South and Southern fiction. McCarthy published *Suttree* in 1979, and the novel reveals some autobiographical information. Jarrett writes that in *Suttree*, the protagonist "bids good-bye to his alcoholic existence in Knoxville, thumbing a ride on the highway heading

west" (4). The drive out west by McCarthy ironically parallels O'Connor's lonely train ride back to Georgia. Although one trip is voluntary and the other is marked by reluctance, each trip marks the beginning of a new period in the life and work of both authors.

In 1952, two years after O'Connor boarded the train to Georgia, *Wise Blood* was published to negative reviews. Many of the reviews for *Wise Blood* acknowledged the power of O'Connor's writing but missed the point of the book. O'Connor returned to Connecticut for a brief visit with the Fitzgeralds then returned to Georgia and was forced to undergo more testing in Atlanta (Gooch 217). She remained at the family farm, Andalusia, in Milledgeville for the rest of her life. O'Connor wrote a tremendous amount during the remainder of her life, including a large body of letters that was collected for publication by Sally Fitzgerald and published in 1979 as *The Habit of Being*. O'Connor also published her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away* in 1960 and a total of thirty-two short stories. Despite the illness, O'Connor did manage some light travel to universities and conferences for speaking engagements. Her lectures and essays from these engagements are collected into *Mystery and Manners*, also selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald. Lupus continued to debilitate O'Connor, and she died in Baldwin County, Georgia, at the age of thirty-nine.

After the publication of *Suttree*, McCarthy continued to write in obscurity in El Paso, Texas, where he still lives today. Few facts are available about McCarthy between the publications of *Blood Meridian* in 1985 and *All The Pretty Horses* in 1992. Jarrett writes that during this period, "McCarthy lived a quiet existence in El Paso, writing regularly in the mornings,

researching the Southwest on several trips, collecting rare books, and playing golf and pool” (5). Due to a newly acquired agent, Amanda Urban, and a new publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, McCarthy gained overnight literary success with the publication of *All The Pretty Horses*. His success continued with the publication of *The Crossing* in 1994 and *Cities of the Plain* in 1998 (Jarrett 5). After another substantial break, McCarthy published *No Country for Old Men* in 2005 and *The Road* in 2006.

Despite the fame and recognition that McCarthy has received over the past two decades, he remains a reclusive person. Jarrett writes, “McCarthy has adamantly protected his privacy since the late 1960s, granting only one significant interview from the 1970s to the 1990s” (6). For this reason, very little is known about the details of McCarthy’s life. It is interesting to note that McCarthy is the hermit novelist that many falsely believe O’Connor was. For years, O’Connor was widely considered to be a recluse; however, the publication of such materials as her extensive body of letters reveals that she remained socially active. McCarthy, though, is undeniably reclusive and private. Nonetheless, McCarthy has a tremendous amount to say—he simply prefers to speak through his fiction. Jarrett notes that “with rare exceptions Cormac McCarthy has preferred to let his fiction, and only his fiction, speak” (6). In many ways, McCarthy speaks the same truths through his fiction as O’Connor does.

Details of McCarthy’s life are unnecessary to establish a strong connection between him and O’Connor; his fiction is loud enough. In her lecture, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” O’Connor says, “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use normal means of talking to

it.” This is an approach that neither McCarthy nor O’Connor uses to speak to their audiences. O’Connor concludes that “when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (MM 34). Karl-Heinz Westarp notes that O’Connor was aware that she wrote “for an audience who thinks God is dead and who does not believe in the Incarnation” (113). O’Connor reveals her awareness of her audience when she writes that “if you live today you breathe in nihilism” (The Habit of Being 97). Both O’Connor and McCarthy are shouting through their fiction, and they are shouting the same message.

Flannery O’Connor and Cormac McCarthy both create grotesque characters to reveal the depraved condition of humanity. In order to fully understand the role of these grotesque characters, the genre of Southern Gothic must first be examined. The use of the grotesque is often found in Southern literature, although the grotesque is certainly not limited to this genre. Cormac McCarthy’s first four novels are widely regarded as “new” Southern literature (Jarrett 7). The idea of “new” Southern literature refers specifically to the “myth of Southern exceptionalism” or “the regional, cultural, historical, and economic differences” between the South and the rest of the country (Jarrett 7). All of O’Connor’s fiction is unavoidably intertwined with the South, and O’Connor discusses the necessity of regional writing in her lecture “The Regional Writer.” O’Connor writes, “Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community” (MM 53). For both O’Connor and McCarthy, that community is the South.

O'Connor and McCarthy's fiction is also described as new Southern literature because it takes place in the industrial South. Jarrett writes, "As do O'Connor's short fiction and her novel *Wise Blood*, most of McCarthy's early fiction (with the exception of *Outer Dark*) takes place against the background of the urbanized New South" (25). The fictional town of Taulkinham in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* offers a depiction of the urbanized South. O'Connor writes that "as soon as he [Hazel] stepped off the train, he began to see signs and lights...most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically" (*Wise Blood* 29). McCarthy describes Knoxville in a similar way in *Suttree*. The bustling economy of Knoxville is developed through the gritty descriptions of "secondhand furniture stores" and "pawnshop windows" (*Suttree* 69).

The characters that O'Connor and McCarthy develop in the Southern community are often grotesque and reveal the depraved state of humanity. O'Connor famously declared that "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (MM 40). Grotesque characters often have a physical, mental, spiritual, or psychological deformity that prohibits them from functioning with a sense of normality. Grotesque characters are also often incongruous and a strange mixture between reality and fantasy. The bizarre combination of realistic and fantastic in the characters of O'Connor and McCarthy is described by O'Connor as a crossroads. "The Writer operates at a peculiar crossroads, where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location," writes O'Connor (MM 59). The crossroads that O'Connor describes

do not exist at a location but within an individual.

These grotesque individuals populate O'Connor's work. For example, Tom T. Shiftlet from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" has a stump for an arm, and his temporary wife, Lucynell, suffers from a mental handicap that limits her to minimal speaking despite being around the age of thirty (*Complete Stories* [CS] 150-151). Hazel Motes suffers from a spiritual grotesqueness that drives him to establish the "Church Without Christ" where "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" (*Wise Blood* 105). Hazel's first convert, Enoch Emory, suffers from a severe mental deficiency. Enoch responds to Hazel's dramatic call for "a new Jesus" by stealing a "dead shriveled-up part-nigger dwarf" from the local museum and giving it to Hazel as the new messiah (*Wise Blood* 176).

Joy Hopewell, from O'Connor's "Good Country People," suffers from both a physical and psychological deformity. Joy has a wooden leg that O'Connor symbolically connects to a part of Joy's soul. Additionally, Joy is psychologically deformed through her failed attempts to seduce a con man disguised as a Bible salesman, who functions as a pseudo savior in the story (Asals 74). Although Joy holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, she is unable to apply her theoretical knowledge to reality. As a result, the Bible salesman easily deceives her, and he steals her wooden leg, taking a part of her both physically and spiritually.

McCarthy also uses the grotesque to reveal the depraved state of humanity. In *Suttree*, McCarthy develops the disgustingly grotesque character of Gene Harrogate. After chasing some pigs through the woods, Harrogate catches one and beats it to death

with a stick; then he cuts open the pig and spreads its insides all over the woods (Suttree 139-140). Harrogate's mental grotesqueness is revealed when he spends his summer evenings rummaging underground sewers towards "the vaults underground where the city's wealth was kept" (Suttree 259).

In the opening of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy writes of the false accusation of Reverend Green by Judge Holden. McCarthy describes Judge Holden in grotesque terms. Holden was "bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them" (*Blood Meridian* 6). Holden interrupts a service and accuses the Reverend Green of having sex with an eleven-year-old girl and a goat. The Reverend immediately labels the Judge as Satan himself, and the characters of *Blood Meridian* often view the Judge as only partially human. The Judge represents the incongruous mixture between the realistic and the fantastic that defines the grotesque.

The depravity of mankind is on display in the characters of O'Connor and McCarthy; however, the display of the wretched depravity is for more than entertainment or humor. In her lecture, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor states, "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause" (MM 33). O'Connor clearly indicates that the problem must be realized before the solution can be presented. In McCarthy's work, Edwin Arnold writes, "There is, in addition, always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of his tales, although that redemption may require more of his

characters than they are willing to give" (44).

It is important to note that both authors have different views of redemption. It is clear that O'Connor advocates an orthodox Catholic view, and her beliefs remain the greatest influence on her writing. Ralph Wood highlights the importance of O'Connor's beliefs when he quotes her as saying, "If I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even enjoy anything" (Wood 27). However, McCarthy does not clearly develop his views on the process of redemption, and it is not my argument that McCarthy adheres to any orthodox religious views on redemption.

Despite the ambiguities behind McCarthy's beliefs, he clearly presents depraved characters in desperate need of redemption through his fiction. Additionally, although McCarthy remains mysterious on his beliefs, the existence of an approach to redemption that resembles Christianity is not impossible. McCarthy might not advocate the same redemption through Jesus Christ as O'Connor, but he clearly calls for a form of redemption. Perhaps McCarthy does not have his beliefs worked out. Nonetheless, McCarthy reveals the need for redemption through his fiction.

McCarthy shows the depraved form of humanity to reveal the necessity of redemptive action through the character of Anton Chigurh in the novel *No Country for Old Men*. Chigurh parallels O'Connor's own depraved killer, The Misfit, from her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Before examining the similarities between the two characters in detail, it is important to observe many comparable themes in both stories. O'Connor and McCarthy use similar techniques and themes in the stories to

develop their depraved characters. First, they both use foreshadowing. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” O’Connor foreshadows the violent death of the grandmother when she writes in the beginning that “anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (CS 118). O’Connor uses the grandmother’s obsessive references to the escaped Misfit to foreshadow their inevitable meeting. In the opening paragraph of the story, the grandmother talks of The Misfit to the family, and The Misfit is the first topic of conversation with Red Sammy when the family stops to eat.

McCarthy also uses foreshadowing in *No Country for Old Men* to reveal the inevitability of death. McCarthy, like O’Connor, focuses on the mortality of humanity and the transient nature of everything through foreshadowing. In the beginning of the novel, McCarthy introduces this theme when Llewelyn Moss is asked where his truck is. He responds, “Gone the way of all flesh. Nothin’s forever.” (No Country [NC] 51). Through continued references to death and darkness, McCarthy foreshadows that most characters will go the way of “all flesh” before the novel ends.

In addition to foreshadowing, O’Connor and McCarthy both use setting as central pieces of their writing. Although the themes of both works are undeniably universal, the setting of each story serves to deepen their commentary on the human condition. In order to fully understand “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the story must be examined in the context of Georgia and the South as a whole. Likewise, in order to fully understand *No Country for Old Men*, it must be examined in the context of Texas and the West as a whole. One of the most important ways O’Connor and McCarthy use location in both stories is through

language. O’Connor captures the southern vernacular through the grandmother and the children, John Wesley and June Star. McCarthy also develops the western setting through the language of his characters. In the novel, Sheriff Bell, Moss, and Carla Jean speak with strong Texan accents.

Not only does location influence the speech of the characters, the setting serves to deepen the themes of O’Connor and McCarthy. The country functions as an important character in each story. In *No Country for Old Men*, not only is the importance of the country revealed in the title, McCarthy develops the country as a character to expand the themes of the novel. McCarthy uses the reference in the title to William Butler Yeats’ poem “Sailing to Byzantium” to capture the theme of eternity. Eternity remains an important theme throughout the novel, and McCarthy broadens this theme through the location of southwest Texas. McCarthy also indirectly addresses eternity through his detailed examination of life and death.

In the novel, everything is moving towards death and an eternal state. This slow inevitable movement is deepened through McCarthy’s use of the country. When Moss is running for his life in the beginning of the novel, McCarthy writes that the “rocks there were etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old. The men who drew them hunters like himself. Of them there was no other trace” (NC 11). The desolate country of southwest Texas is continually described as dead, quiet, and empty. On numerous occasions throughout the novel, Moss and Sheriff Bell stare out at the open country, and McCarthy describes the scene with one word: “nothing.” The country, as a character, assumes a nihilistic approach to life and shows no compassion for the men who run and die on her hills and valleys.

O'Connor also uses setting in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." At the end of the story, The Misfit searches the sky for God. O'Connor describes The Misfit as "looking up again at the cloudless sky" (CS 131). The Misfit appears to be waiting, like Francis Tarwater from *The Violent Bear It Away*, for the "Lord's call" out of "a clear and empty sky" (*The Violent Bear It Away* 22). According to Joanne McMullen, the sun serves as the "symbolic substitute for God" in the story (36). The sunlight that symbolically represents the grace of God is occasionally blocked by natural obstacles such as clouds and human obstacles such as hats that function as barriers between humanity and redemption. Additionally, the dark woods that serve as the location for the murder of June Star, John Wesley, the mother, the baby, and Bailey clearly represent death.

Another theme that exists in both works is the rejection of the idea that humanity is becoming increasingly more evil. O'Connor and McCarthy develop this false ideology through their characters to reveal its logical and theological inconsistencies. The rejection of this belief is directly connected to the theme of redemption in both works. The depraved condition of humanity that O'Connor and McCarthy reveal is not a new condition, but the human condition. When Red Sammy claims that "a good man is hard to find" (CS 122), it is clear that he believes that at one time it was not difficult to find a good man. He continues to say that "everything is going terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more" (CS 122). The grandmother fully agrees with Red Sammy, and she represents the common attitude of older generations that consider the younger

generation to be marked by disrespect and disorder.

Like Red Sammy and the grandmother, Sheriff Bell also believes that humanity is growing increasingly more evil. In the first page of the novel, Bell reflects on the experience of watching the execution of a nineteen-year-old boy for killing a fourteen-year-old girl. Bell says, "I thought I'd never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind" (NC 3). Later in the novel, after discovering the results of the deadly gunfight in the desert, Bell says, "I have this feelin we're looking at somethin we really aint never even seen before" (NC 46). In his diary entries that serve as the narration of the novel, Bell continually refers to horrific stories that he reads in the newspapers as clear evidence that the world is falling apart.

For both O'Connor and McCarthy, the decay of the morality of humanity is an illusion. O'Connor's devout Catholic beliefs would not lead her to conclude that mankind is becoming more evil but that people throughout history are intrinsically sinful. "Fiction," according to O'Connor, "is about everything human and we are made out of dust" (MM 68). O'Connor espouses a view of the origin of humanity that flows from the account of creation in Genesis through her reference to mankind being formed from dust. Through this view, and in addition to many other comments, it is clear that O'Connor considers mankind to be plagued with sin, a condition that is not a recent development.

Once again, McCarthy chooses to speak only through his fiction. However, it appears that McCarthy agrees with O'Connor on the antediluvian nature of the human condition. In the end of the novel, Bell encounters an ideological attack from

his uncle Ellis. When informed of Bell's intention to retire, Ellis questions Bell's motives and tells a series of family stories that illustrates his point that depraved people are not a new breed but are as old as the country.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and *No Country for Old Men* share many themes and ideas; however, nothing comes closer than the similarities between both antagonists, The Misfit and Anton Chigurh. First, I will examine The Misfit. The most important aspect of The Misfit remains his deep involvement with God. It would be wrong to conclude that because The Misfit murders the grandmother and the family that he operates without a conscience or an awareness of God. The Misfit is painfully aware of his own sin. During the conversation with the grandmother, The Misfit reveals that he was punished but can't remember what the crime was (CS 130). Richard Giannone writes that "whereas the grandmother feels blameless, The Misfit feels only guilt" (Mystery of Love 49). The Misfit knows that he has committed crimes, and he even considers these crimes to be wrong; however, he fails to consider himself responsible for his own actions. The Misfit, as with any O'Connor character, is capable of receiving grace. In fact, O'Connor considers The Misfit a more likely recipient of grace than the grandmother. O'Connor writes, "It is true that the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for The Misfit's, nor is her capacity for grace equal to his" (MM 111).

Despite his capacity for grace, The Misfit does not accept the offer. When the grandmother instructs The Misfit to pray, he responds with, "I don't want no hep. I'm doing all right by myself" (CS 130). The Misfit is aware of his decision to reject God. When talking about Jesus, The Misfit says

that "if He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can" (CS 132). The Misfit knows the offer made by Jesus and reiterated by the grandmother, and he chooses to reject Him. For The Misfit, "knowledge is no match for the workings of pride" (Coles 139). The Misfit's decision to pursue his own path is illustrated by O'Connor's application of T.S. Eliot's famous maxim: "It is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing" (Stephens 33).

Despite The Misfit's choice to reject God and pursue pleasure, he fails to find any happiness in his life. After shooting the grandmother three times through the chest, he ends the story by saying, "It's no real pleasure in life" (CS 133). The absence of pleasure for The Misfit is a result of an intentional numbing of his feelings. Giannone writes that "The Misfit freely wills dejection. He wants to make himself impassible and succeeds in deadening emotion" (Mystery of Love 51). The Misfit attempts to remove emotion from his life in order to silence his conscience.

Anton Chigurh, like The Misfit, is deeply involved with God. His level of involvement does not indicate any form of acquiescence with God—it reveals a strong opposition to God. In the novel, Chigurh is doing the work of the devil, but he is not the devil. Giannone describes The Misfit as the descendent of Lucifer, a demon (Hermit Novelist 105). Likewise, Chigurh could also be falsely viewed as a demon or as Satan himself. However, neither of these possible associations is accurate. "I don't want to equate The Misfit with the devil," says O'Connor (MM 112). The Misfit and

Chigurh do not function as the devil or even as demons but as men without God.

Sheriff Bell clearly believes in the existence of Satan and recognizes the work of Chigurh as evidence that Satan exists. In reference to the “true and living prophet of destruction,” Bell says, “I know he’s real. I have seen his work” (NC 4). Later in the novel, when Bell reflects on the question of Satan’s existence, he says, “He explains a lot of things that otherwise don’t have no explanation. Or not to me they don’t” (NC 218). Although Bell acknowledges the existence of Satan, he does not claim that Chigurh is Satan himself.

Chigurh represents what man has the potential to become when he rejects God’s commands and chooses to define right and wrong. In the novel, Chigurh clearly functions out of a misplaced sense of convictions and principals. When Carson Wells catches up to Moss in the hospital, he refers to Chigurh when he says, “You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that” (NC 153). Chigurh’s misguided sense of morality is fully revealed when he murders Carla Jean because he gave his word to Moss.

The conversation between Chigurh and Carla Jean remains strikingly similar to the conversation between The Misfit and the grandmother. Both Chigurh and The Misfit are offered a different path by their victims, and they both reject the path and refuse to accept grace. Moments before Chigurh murders Carla Jean, she looks at him one last time and says, “You dont have to. You dont” (NC 259). Carla Jean offers an alternate path; however, Chigurh refuses. He responds, “I have only one way to live. It doesnt allow for special cases” (NC 259). Chigurh remains dedicated to the perverted

principles that determine his actions. Like The Misfit, Chigurh attempts to remove responsibility from his life. Through the conversation with the grandmother, The Misfit reveals his determination to remove guilt and responsibility from his life. He convinces himself that the absence of physical miracles and the weakness of his will are enough to justify his rejection of God. The Misfit thinks over the crucifixion of Christ and declares, “If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now” (CS 132). The Misfit remains in bondage to his corrupted soul that is hardened through continual rejection of Christ’s offer to “throw away everything and follow Him” (CS 132).

In the same way, Chigurh attempts to remove responsibility for his actions. When offered a different path by Carla Jean, Chigurh responds, “I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this” (NC 259). Chigurh is fiercely committed to the idea of fate within his distorted ideology. Chigurh even apologizes multiple times to Carla Jean before he shoots her because he does not consider himself responsible for his own actions. The world, in Chigurh’s mind, is composed of moving objects that are controlled by fate. These objects move in a synchronized dance that produces life and brings death. In this case, Chigurh happens to be the object that is appointed to bring the death of Carla Jean. He tells her, “When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end” (NC 260). Chigurh, in his corrupted mind, is nothing more than an object that moves in a dance orchestrated by some distant authority.

Chigurh remains a slave to his concept of fate like The Misfit remains a slave to his idea of free will. They both fear any action that would make them vulnerable. The Misfit shoots the grandmother as soon as she touches him. Any form of human contact, especially for a man who intentionally hardens his heart to remove emotion, would create vulnerability. In the same way, Chigurh rejects Carla Jean's offer by shaking his head and saying, "You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do" (NC 259).

The Misfit and Chigurh attempt to remove God from their lives by an act of will. The Misfit considers his will powerless, and Chigurh considers his will powerful. According to Giannone, The Misfit grants that "one's nature can be so corrupt that one's will is powerless to obey God's commands" (Mystery of Love 49). In another way, Chigurh admits, "I'm not sure why I did this but I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can" (NC 174-175). The Misfit attempts to escape the consequences of God's commands through justifying his actions with a powerless will that is unable to obey God, and Chigurh attempts to transcend God's commands through the strength of his will.

Additionally, The Misfit and Chigurh are committed to their own sense of justice. The Misfit is outraged by the life and death of Jesus Christ because it does not fit his view of justice and fairness. Twice, The Misfit declares that "Jesus thrown everything off balance" (CS 131). The Misfit's outcry for justice and balance resembles Hazel's preaching for the Church Without Christ where "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" (Wise Blood 105). The

Misfit is unable to fit Jesus into his view of justice and balance. He asks the grandmother, "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?" (CS 131). The crucifixion of Christ contradicts The Misfit's conception of justice, and he refuses to accept it.

Like The Misfit, Chigurh operates out of a disturbed sense of justice. Chigurh considers the killing of Carla Jean an act of justice because he gave his word to Moss. Also, Chigurh relentlessly pursues the lost money in order to return it to the original owner, not to keep it for his own profit. Despite some selfish motives of establishing good connections, Chigurh remains unwaveringly dedicated to restoring justice, although he has no issue with killing people who stand in the way of his restoration of justice and balance.

Furthermore, The Misfit and Chigurh attempt to gain more understanding of the world through the eyes of their victims. For Chigurh, this experience remains an intrinsic piece of his motivations to murder. When Chigurh murders Carla Jean, he is not interested in only killing her. In fact, most of Chigurh's dialogue in the novel occurs with his victims right before he kills them. Chigurh clearly believes that people only truly reveal themselves right before death. As a result, he attempts to know his victims and through learning more of who they are, increase his understanding of humanity. Before Chigurh kills Carson Wells, he tries to persuade Wells to examine his life right before his death. Chigurh also attempts to reveal the foolishness of living a certain way. He asks Wells, "If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?" (NC 175). Once again, Chigurh expounds his belief in fate and living by certain immutable rules.

In the same way, *The Misfit* aims to increase his understanding of the world and humanity through his victims. The Misfit, like Chigurh, does not simply kill his victims, he engages with them in extended dialogue. When the grandmother asks a question, The Misfit responds with personal details of his own life. In fact, until the grandmother is transformed and reaches out to touch him, The Misfit's intentions with the grandmother are unclear. During the conversation, the possibility remains that The Misfit might not kill the grandmother. For a while, he is more interested in talking to her than killing her. However, as soon as the grandmother experiences grace, The Misfit rejects her offer of compassion.

The experience of grace by the grandmother leads to an equally important part of the conversations between the killers and their victims—the reactions of the victims. The grandmother and Carla Jean have similar reactions to the encounters with their killers. Most importantly, they both are transformed through an acceptance of grace. The grandmother ultimately recognizes her own sins in *The Misfit* as she declares, “Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my children” (CS 132).

Although she is murdered directly after saying this, O'Connor reveals her transformation through multiple symbols. The grandmother's hat is removed after the car crash, and although she puts it back on, it comes off again in her hand, and she lets it fall to the ground (CS 128). In many of her stories, including “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” O'Connor uses hats symbolically. O'Connor's “characters seem to wear hats while unsaved but become hatless when saved” (McMullen 37). Although the removal of a hat for one of O'Connor's characters can lead to redemption, it is not

always a guarantee. Rather, it is the removal of a barrier that exists between the character and God. O'Connor's symbolism remains consistent in application to *The Misfit*. When *The Misfit* is conversing with the grandmother about God, he removes his hat; however, right before he kills her, he places his hat back on.

Not only does the grandmother remove her hat, she also collapses with “her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (CS 132). O'Connor symbolically uses the sky to represent God, or at least the possibility of God (McMullen 35). When the rest of the family is dragged out to be shot in the woods and *The Misfit* and the grandmother are left alone, O'Connor writes, “There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun” (CS 131). When the grandmother dies, all barriers between her and God are removed. Giannone notes that the “source of the old lady's change can also be seen in her bodily collapse” (Hermit Novelist 104). The grandmother asserts her own will throughout the story until her last moments, and when she collapses in “a puddle of blood” she has “her legs crossed under her like a child's” (CS 132). Her childlike position is juxtaposed to the grandmother's position of power in the beginning of the story with her hand on her hip as she tries to convince the family to go to Tennessee instead of Florida. Although the grandmother's capacity for grace is not equal to that of *The Misfit*, she is ultimately the one to receive grace through recognition of her own sins.

In a similar way, Carla Jean is transformed in the last moments before her death. Although Carla Jean's experience is not clearly a redemptive one, she does transcend to a new level of understanding. In the same vein as O'Connor, McCarthy writes that Carla Jean “sat and put her hat on the bed beside her and then picked it up

again and held it to her” (NC 254). With her hat removed, she offers Chigurh a different path, but he refuses. However, Chigurh, like The Misfit, reveals his awareness of his decision. He tells Carla Jean that even “a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact” (NC 256). Chigurh’s capacity for grace outweighs Carla Jean’s due to his understanding of his choice to take a certain path. Chigurh makes no attempt to deny the existence of God, or even his belief in Him, but he does refuse to accept any form of grace or love.

As Chigurh explains his thoughts on fate to Carla Jean, she reaches a new level of awareness. Until this point in the novel, Carla Jean is defined by naiveté. Upon her encounter with Chigurh, she transcends to a new level of understanding through the acceptance of her fate. Chigurh explains the different paths offered to every person—including the path that he chose. The existence of the option, or as O’Connor described, the “peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet” (MM 59), reveals the need for redemption. Carla Jean understands this, like the grandmother, for the first time in her life. The evil that exists within Chigurh exposes the need for redemption to Carla Jean.

This revelation to Carla Jean is not only helpful, it is necessary. O’Connor comments on the necessity for encountering evil before redemptive work can occur when she says, “In my stories a reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective” (MM 117). Chigurh, although not the devil himself, lays the path out before Carla Jean, and she sees her need for redemption for the first time. Moments before Chigurh shoots Carla Jean, he tells her, “You can say that things could

have turned out differently” and asks her if she understands (NC 260). Her last words before her death are, “I do. I truly do” (NC 260). While Carla Jean might not experience grace the same way the grandmother does, she encounters evil and understands her need for redemption.

The previously discussed themes of *No Country for Old Men* are visually presented in the film adaptation of the novel by the Coen brothers. McCarthy develops many subtle themes through the course of the novel, and the Coen brothers creatively represent McCarthy’s writing through visual images. The Coen brothers begin the film with a series of eleven establishing shots that show the deserted plains of southwest Texas. Each shot lasts for a few seconds, and the first three shots show the lonely hills before the sun rises (Coen). Sheriff Bell’s entries that serve as the narration of the novel form a voiceover at the beginning of the film. Bell’s narration juxtaposed with the sequence of establishing shots of the early morning establishes an important theme that McCarthy develops in the novel: the morning brings death.

Multiple times in the course of the novel, McCarthy twists the common theme of morning bringing new life though the death or near death of many characters directly before a new day begins. When Moss flees from the crime scene in the novel, he is shot and collapses on the ground. McCarthy writes, “He opened his eyes. The fresh world of morning above him, turning slowly” (NC 32). Further on, when Moss is shot again and crosses the border, he awakens the next day, nearly dead, and looks “away toward the dawn” (NC 119). And when Chigurh kills Wells, McCarthy notes that the “new day was still a minute away” (NC 178). The Coen brothers introduce this theme through the sequence of

opening shots in the film that shows the day breaking with Bell's narration of encountering evil.

As Bell recounts his experiences with evil, the first scene of the film shows Chigurh being arrested and placed in a cop car. Bell's voiceover tells of a kind of man whom he has never seen before—a man with an unprecedented capacity for evil. The Coen brothers place these words over the scene of Chigurh being arrested to connect him with the idea of unprecedented evil. The opening shots and the first scene also establish the same mood that McCarthy develops in the novel—death is coming and nothing can be done to stop it.

The Coen brothers further develop the theme of light bringing death when Moss is pursued by armed men in a truck after he returns to the crime scene. In the scene, Moss is running through the darkness when the light of the truck illuminates his body, then lighting is seen directly ahead of Moss. The next shot reveals the day breaking and the first hint of the rising sun on the horizon. As Moss attempts to hide, light reveals his position and decreases his chances of survival.

The establishing sequence of shots also introduces an important theme that exists in both the novel and O'Connor's short story: the absence of humanity. This absence is both literal and spiritual. Throughout the novel, McCarthy describes the setting with a few simple words: "nothing," "dead," and "silence." An absence of humanity exists in both the literal country and in the spiritual side of the characters. O'Connor develops a similar theme when she writes that there "was nothing around her but woods" (CS 131). The grandmother finds herself facing the same problem that Bell examines in the first

page of the novel: "What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul?" (NC 3-4). The Coen brothers develop the idea of the absence of humanity through the opening sequence of shots that lead to the first scene where Chigurh is the first person to enter the frame.

Additionally, in the middle of the film, Chigurh pursues Moss through deserted streets and an empty hotel. During the pursuit, the Coen brothers stage the fight in locations that are completely absent of humanity. Furthermore, the two men who enter the action, the hotel clerk and the man driving the truck, are instantly killed. The Coens use the desolate settings to represent McCarthy's repetitive single word descriptions, such as "nothing" and "silence." In the novel and the film, humanity is both literally and spiritually absent.

McCarthy also ascribes certain animal-like instincts to Chigurh in the novel. When traveling to Dryden to observe the effects of Chigurh's murderous actions, Bell stops on the side of the highway to find a dead redtail that is described as "Shadowless. Lost in the concentration of the hunter" (NC 45). This description is placed between conversations on Chigurh, thereby attributing the hunter instincts of the redtail to him. Chigurh pursues his prey, Moss, with the intensity and undivided focus of a hunter. In the same way, O'Connor foreshadows the actions of *The Misfit* through the description of a monkey. In the story, when the family arrives at Red Sam's to eat, the children run up to a nearby monkey. O'Connor writes, "The monkey sprang back into the tree and got on the highest limb as soon as he saw the children jump out of the car and run toward him" (CS 121). The monkey retreats when the innocent children run toward him. Likewise,

when the grandmother reaches out in compassion to The Misfit, O'Connor writes that "The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (CS 132). The Misfit reacts, like the monkey, out of instinct to a potential threat. The children threaten the monkey's safety, and the grandmother threatens The Misfit's resolve to remove emotion from his life.

The Coen brothers capture the animal-like qualities of Chigurh in the film. First of all, Chigurh displays almost no emotion. His expression rarely changes, even in deadly circumstances, and he pursues Moss with the concentration of a hunter in the wild. In the film, when Chigurh initially finds Moss at the Regal Motel through the use of the tracking device, his face displays no emotion but instead a look of confidence as he closes in on his kill. The Coen brothers also develop Chigurh's inherent tendencies through focusing on the surgery he performs on himself after being shot in the leg. The surgery scene in the motel is rather lengthy and reveals Chigurh's instinctive desire for survival. In the film and the novel, Chigurh does nothing that is not connected to his mission or his survival. Once again, he displays no emotion as he operates on himself, and he attempts to alleviate the pain not to prevent any displeasure but to accelerate his pursuit of Moss.

The question of reality remains a fundamental piece of the novel. McCarthy uses dreams and transient images to question the nature of all reality. On multiple occasions in the novel, Bell stirs his coffee and glances in his spoon and observes the "smoking silver bowl of it" (NC 126). McCarthy also writes, "The face that lapped and shifted in the dark liquid in the cup seemed an omen of things to come. Things

losing shape" (NC 127). McCarthy writes many related images that establish a questionable or loose grip on reality. This mood is strengthened in the novel by the looming presence of death that exists in between every line. McCarthy reveals the importance of this theme by ending the novel with it. On the last pages of the novel, Bell describes a dream he had that included his father going ahead of him and preparing the way by building a fire "out there in all that dark and all that cold" (NC 309).

The film captures McCarthy's question of reality through many ephemeral images. When Chigurh travels to Moss's abandoned trailer home, he sits in front of the television for a moment. The Coen brothers focus on a shot of the reflection of Chigurh in the television and return to the same shot when Bell sits down in front of the television just moments after Chigurh leaves. The image captures the transitory feeling that McCarthy develops in the novel. The reflection in the television presents Chigurh and Bell as vague images that lose shape the same way McCarthy describes Bell's reflection in the coffee cup. The Coen brothers use the same image at the end of the film when Bell returns to the motel where Moss is killed to look for Chigurh. As Bell notices the empty lock on the door that indicates the presence of Chigurh, he stares into the empty golden lock and sees a distant reflection of Chigurh. On the other side, Chigurh hides behind the door and sees a blurry reflection of Bell waiting outside the door. This shot perfectly reflects the question of reality that McCarthy develops in the novel.

In conclusion, O'Connor, McCarthy, and the Coen brothers show the need for redemption and the possibility of divine grace through depraved and grotesque characters. In order to understand the

solution, the problem must first be fully understood. The depraved condition of humanity is on display in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” *No Country for Old Men*, and the film adaptation of *No Country for Old*

Men. These works successfully create “large and startling figures” (MM 34) to shock the blind into seeing their intrinsic depravity and to reveal the necessity of redemption through grace and faith.

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