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"Goin' to Hell in a Handbasket": The Yeatsian Apocalypse  
and *No Country for Old Men*

Connor Race Davis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### "Goin' to Hell in a Handbasket": The Yeatsian Apocalypse and *No Country for Old Men*

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On its surface, Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* appears to be a thoroughly grim and even fatalistic novel, but read in conjunction with W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming"—a work with which the novel has a number of intertextual connections—it becomes clear that there is a distinct optimism at the heart of the novel. Approaching McCarthy's novel as an intertext with Yeats' poem illuminates an apparent critique of eschatological panic present in *No Country for Old Men*, provided mainly through Sheriff Bell's reflections on the state of society.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, W.B. Yeats, Sheriff Bell, Lewelyn Moss, Anton Chigurh,  
eschatology, apocalypse, adaptation theory

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"Goin' to Hell in a Handbasket": The Yeatsian Apocalypse and *No Country for Old Men*

The title of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel —taken from the first line of W.B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium"—is the first indication that *No Country for Old Men* is a work that intentionally invokes other literature, and that the author has taken no pains to hide it. Steven Frye's excellent article "Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium' and McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*: Art and Artifice in the Novel" explores the relationship between the two texts vis-à-vis the appropriateness of representing a "commonplace, transient, death-strewn world" with "overly aestheticized prose" (14). McCarthy has put his novel and Yeats' poetry into conversation with his simple yet powerful title, and Frye's essay is one exemplary exploration of how that intertextual relationship can offer greater insight into *No Country for Old Men*. Frye's fascinating contention is that the novel presents the readers with two worlds: the down-to-earth one provided by Bell's narration, and the Yeatsian world available in the omniscient narration.

Frye shows that it is certainly valuable to explore the intertextual connections between *No Country for Old Men* and "Sailing to Byzantium," but another Yeats' poem may offer an equally interesting comparison. This essay will assess the relationship between the novel and Yeats' exhaustively anthologized 1919 poem "The Second Coming." McCarthy's intertextual method of writing is well documented, and it allows him to amplify, question, and respond to the works in the literary tradition that have come before him. It seems that his goal is often to correct or question a work and its philosophical underpinnings. McCarthy's interface with *No Country for Old Men* is one of amplification—a recreation that functions almost as an advanced scientific observation of the factors at play. That is, he takes the ideas and values espoused in Yeats' poem and gives them form in the laboratory

of his novel, allowing their implications to bear themselves out. McCarthy doesn't use his pen to engage directly with the ideas in "The Second Coming," but rather he gives those ideas hypothetical space to deconstruct themselves, much to the horror of the reader.

Examining these two works as interlocutors offers new, fruitful perspectives on McCarthy's novel. On its surface *No Country for Old Men* appears to be thoroughly grim and even fatalistic, but read in comparison to "The Second Coming" it becomes clear that there is a distinct optimism at the heart of this novel.

"The Second Coming" is considered to be "one of the most universally admired poems" of the 20th century (Bloom 9). A relatively concise work at just over twenty lines, "The Second Coming" is exhaustively reprinted, and even the poetry neophyte has likely encountered it at some point in her life. The poem contains several iconic images and scenes in its two stanzas, one of the foremost being the falconer and his bird. The opening lines read "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (1-2). This figure of a trained falconry bird that will not return to its human master's gauntlet is often seen as a symbol of dissolution, and anarchy (Ross 219). In addition, these first lines evoke the image of the gyre, a geometric pattern central to Yeats' complicated vision of history. The gyre and its importance will be discussed in greater detail later in this work, but for now it is important to note the image of the bird spiraling up higher and higher, beyond the sound of its master's call. This loss of control is related to a more general chaos for Yeats, and the rest of the first stanza is dedicated to this theme. In fact, the next lines of the poem describe a global loss of order: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (3-4). Amidst all this chaos and loss of innocence, Yeats' speaker tells of disturbing changes in the character of humanity itself:

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” (7-8). With all of its gloomy forecasts on humanity’s future, it’s easy to see why Herbert Levine suggests that with “The Second Coming” Yeats “struck out on a prophetic path” (176).

The poem’s first stanza uses a lost falcon to symbolize a distinct loss of control the world’s ills, and the second stanza speculates as to what that loss of control might engender. Yeats’ speaker imagines a “rough beast, its hour come round at last” (21) emerging as the protagonist of a corrupt Second Coming that “surely . . . is at hand” (9). This figure is depicted as “somewhere in the sands of the desert/A shape with lion body and the head of a man” (13-14), and the speaker ends the poem with this interrogative: what is this antithetical messiah that “slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” (22). Not only the final line, but the poem itself is a question. It asks, as Helen Vendler puts it, “what shape the new dispensation will take” (24). Through the concept of the gyre, the poem begins to define the nature of and precedent for this new anti-Messiah hinted at in its final line.

The Yeatsian notion of the gyres of history—interlocked, opposing cones that represent the rise and fall of the epochs of humanity, are at the heart of “The Second Coming.” These symbolic figures are described at length in Yeats’ aptly titled work *A Vision*. In this theoretical manifesto, Yeats delineates a view of history and philosophy heavily influenced by the occult as well as Irish tradition. He posits the idea that inevitable cycles of time dictate the rise and fall of kingdoms, and that humanity is caught in this system of upheaval and inevitable progress toward destruction and renewal. As O'Brien and Henningfeld put it, "Yeats sees history as a cycle of declines and regenerations. Each historical era is replaced by its opposite. Gyres describe the interacting and conflicting eras" (“The Second Coming”). As one system ends, another epoch is beginning. Yeats'



system dictated that, in his words, “every two thousand and odd years something happens in the world” that ushers in a new age, antithetical to the last (*A Vision* 28). Indeed, the subject matter of several of his poems indicates his interest in the thresholds of various ages. His works “Leda and the Swan” and “The Mother of God” are annunciation poems—snapshots of the inception of two epochs, the end of one of which was harbinger for the beginning of the other. Those historical poems fit into his system of describing history in epochs, one forming as the other reaches its crescendo.

Of course this makes “The Second Coming” Yeats’ big question—what new age is forming as our Christian era winds to a close? This worry about what the future might hold, and the ability of current systems to keep up with the new developments is also a key concern in *No Country for Old Men*. One critic called the novel McCarthy’s book of Revelation, with the Border Trilogy as his Gospels, and *Blood Meridian* his book of Genesis (Broncano 2). The identification of *No Country for Old Men* with the book of Revelation<sup>1</sup> is an appropriate one, considering that John’s Revelation on the Isle of Patmos focuses on the Second Coming of Christ and the destruction inherent therein. As a matter of fact, Loretta and Bell discuss the book of scripture in the novel, and whether it’s prophetic vision might contain any illumination on the state of the world: “I asked [Loretta] if Revelations had anything to say about the shape things was takin and she said she’d let me know” (304). Toward the end of the novel, Sheriff Bell wonders if perhaps the younger generation wearing “green hair and bones in their noses” are in fact a twisted iteration of the “signs and wonders” of Christian prophecy (295).

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Revelation is also commonly called “The Apocalypse of John” in Christian tradition.

It is easy to see why “The Second Coming” is often characterized as a prophetic lament<sup>2</sup>—a prediction of woes soon to be brought on because of (or at least in conjunction with) worsening political and societal trends. Such a reading is bolstered by the fact that Yeats’ writing often dealt with the political issues of his day. Indeed, an early draft of “The Second Coming” made overt reference to the military rumblings of the time, reading, “the falcon cannot hear the falconer/the Germans have now to Russia come” (Stallworthy 17). While this reference was specifically to the 1917 Russian Revolution, indicating that Yeats had a particular geo-political situation in mind when he wrote the poem, the author’s statements from years later also indicate that, at least eventually, he saw his poem as carrying a message of more general social and political relevance that reached well beyond the circumstances of its creation<sup>3</sup>. In a letter written in 1936<sup>4</sup> Yeats instructs his friend Ethel Mannin to “go look up a poem called ‘The Second Coming.’ It was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago and foretold what is happening... I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe. ‘The ceremony of innocence is drowned’” (qtd. in Wade 851). On another occasion, Yeats commented on “The Second Coming” saying that he saw the world as “a bundle of fragments,” (*Autobiographies* 163) but even he had not anticipated “the growing murderousness of the world” (166). Thus the poem can be seen as a kind of prophetic work, functioning as a commentary on the

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Levine describes “The Second Coming” as Yeats having “struck out on a prophetic path” (176) and Whitaker calls him “one of the prophets of twentieth-century violence” (73).

<sup>3</sup> Geraldine Higgins suggests that while Yeats does seem to agree that this poem had prescient qualities, this came as a surprise to him (146).

<sup>4</sup> Nineteen thirty-six was another year of great political unease—the German Third Reich was shoring up its offensive capabilities while simultaneously ceding more power to Adolf Hitler. That year saw single-candidate ballots and farcical elections in Germany (Nohlan and Stöver).

troubled times in which it was wrought, but also on any future incidents to which it might apply. It is certainly clear Yeats viewed the poem this way.

In 1986, Harold Bloom declared that “The Second Coming” is more concerned with the plight of poets and literature than armies and elections (*William Butler Yeats* 10), but the poem continues to enjoy a special political relevance today, deserved or not. Upheavals of any kind result in the poem’s reappearance, either as justification for or explanation of troubling events, and it is important to note that those who cite “The Second Coming” in such a manner may do it with a shallow understanding of Yeats and his poetry; it appears that Yeats is often seen as an apocalyptic poet of our modern era. Examples from the past year show how Yeats’ words continue to be seen as political prophecy, a phenomena that was presumably prevalent when McCarthy wrote *No Country for Old Men*, just as it is now. According to *the Wall Street Journal*, “some of Yeats’s most resonant lines have been quoted in news sources more often in the first seven months of 2016 than any other year in the past three decades;” indeed, Twitter analytics show that on June 24, 2016—the day after Britain’s historic and destabilizing vote to leave the E.U.—the phrase “the centere cannot hold” was tweeted or retweeted 499 times, and that in the weeks after, the frequency of that same phrases had increased by more than 50% when compared to its pre-Brexit popularity (Ballard). Bloom may see these political and social readings as *misreadings*; but it is, nevertheless, important to recognize that such meaning seems to be among the poem’s sources of relevance in today’s tumultuous worlds, even if these readings are not congruent

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<sup>5</sup> As another example of note, economist Paul Krugman saw it fitting to bring Yeats into the American political fray when he declared in a recent *New York Times* op-ed, “These days, the best — or at any rate the alleged wise men and women who are supposed to be looking after the nation’s welfare — lack all conviction, while the worst, as represented by much of the G.O.P., are filled with a passionate intensity” (Krugman). See also E.J. Dionne’s timely

with traditional interpretations of Yeats' philosophy, or if they reduce his poem to being merely the anthem for those that believe the sky is falling.

Perhaps this association is why McCarthy set his sights on this poem. Not only is "The Second Coming" a major artistic accomplishment, but people seem to acknowledge and even embrace the apocalyptic mentality it expresses, as well as Yeats' black and white view of how "conviction" and "intensity" affect the proverbial battle between good and evil. These ideas about action, bravery, and passion fit well into the traditional American ideal of manhood and rugged individualism—an issue that McCarthy, it seems, cannot help but revisit in his novels<sup>6</sup>.

*No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy's ninth novel, began life as a screenplay in the 1980s (Flood), and wasn't published as a novel until 2005. It was a commercial success, making *The New York Times*' "100 Notable Books of the Year" list ("100"). It's the story of Llewellyn Moss, an ex-marine sniper and Vietnam War veteran, working as a welder in West Texas in 1980. During an antelope hunt in the desert, he comes across evidence of a major narcotics deal gone bad. He finds a truck full of drugs, a large bag of money, and a host of bullet-ridden bodies. After careful consideration, Moss fatefully decides to take the money back to his trailer-park home, not knowing that the satchel containing the money hides a tracking device. Taking the cash puts Anton Chigurh, a philosophizing hired killer, on Moss' trail, and for most of the rest of the novel the two play an unrelenting game of cat-and-mouse across the Texas/Mexico borderlands. As Chigurh pursues, it becomes clear

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piece "Trumpism and the Center: When Yeats Comes Knocking" cited at the end of this work.

<sup>6</sup> See Cutchins' "All the Pretty Horses: Cormac McCarthy's Reading of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*," Parkes' "History, Bloodshed, and the Spectacle of American Identity in *Blood Meridian*," and John Cant's thorough monograph *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*.

that he views the world with a terrifying, sociopathic detachment, believing himself to be arbiter of a twisted providence. Many innocent people perish in the figurative crossfire between the two men, including Carla-Jean, Moss' young wife. As the body count rises, the shadowy criminal organization that sent Chigurh after Moss hires counter-assassin Carson Wells, and tasks him with safely retrieving the money from the increasingly unpredictable Chigurh. However, Chigurh quickly kills Wells, and Moss, unable to successfully run or hide, is soon gunned down as well, though perhaps not by Chigurh.

The bloody story is punctuated with the first-person reflections of the Texas lawman pursuing both Bell and Chigurh. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is a third-generation peace officer and decorated World War Two veteran. His inner dialogue is printed in italic typeface to distinguish it from the omnisciently narrated action of the rest of the novel. Perhaps due to the occupational hazards associated with his profession, Sheriff Bell's reminiscences often dwell on heroism, violence, morality, and the general state of the world. In his pursuit of Moss and Chigurh, he always seems to be a step behind, never catching either man. Eventually, after Chigurh emerges as the "last man standing," and it is down to just him and the Sheriff, Bell decides to retire from law enforcement rather than continue pursuing the ghost-like Chigurh and others like him who, the Sheriff believes, are sure to come. Bell's musings on a perceived increase in lawlessness, chaos, and violence, make his narration a sort of lament for society, and make up the moral center of the novel.

Indeed, the opening page of the novel contains Sheriff Bell's reflection on an unrepentant man he sent to the execution chamber: "I thought I'd never seen a person like that and it got me to wondering if maybe he was some new kind" (3). Elsewhere he echoes the thought:

I used to say they were the same [people] we've always had to deal with. Same ones my granddaddy had to deal with. Back then they was rustlin cattle. Now they're runnin dope. But I dont know as that's true no more...I aint sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I dont know what to do about em even. If you killed em all they'd have to build a annex on to hell. (79)

The Sheriff's worry over the future lead him to conclude that "all of us [are] ill prepared for what is to come and I dont care what shape it takes. And whatever comes my guess is that it will have small power to sustain us" (295). His thoughts on the state and fate of society are a powerful force in the novel (both the opening and closing chapters of the novel are his reflective narration), and yet his attempt to work out "some notion of where the ride's going" (265) should not be misconstrued as a reflection of the novel's philosophical position on the matter. Indeed, Bell seems at times to be a foil against which the novel can compare other ways of seeing the contemporary world, with its attendant ills and triumphs. Nevertheless, this apocalyptic view of humanity's state—and "how it's fixin to get" (*No Country* 296)—is one of the first ties that binds *No Country for Old Men* to "The Second Coming."

Claiming a McCarthy novel to be an intertext is not a new critical endeavor. For good reason, McCarthy scholarship often focuses on the intertextuality between the author's works and other pieces of art, written and visual. Timothy Parrish says that "Homer, the Greek tragedians, the King James Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain...Lucretius, St. Augustine, Charles Darwin, and Nietzsche" are all to be found in his novels (67). Lists created by many other critics suggest connections to even more authors. For instance, Brian Evenson suggests Kerouac (62), while Frye adds the

perennially cited Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and Hemingway (*Understanding* 1). Flannery O'Connor and William Wordsworth are also regularly identified as intertextual players in his works. That critics have compiled these extensive lists should not be taken as evidence that McCarthy's works can be compared with simply any other work. Rather, these lists suggest McCarthy's dizzying familiarity with various scholarly disciplines, and the fact that his novels and plays tend to be painstakingly intertextual<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps more to the point, these perceived intertextual references suggest that scholars need to pay careful attention to McCarthy's titles, quotations, and allusions. Speaking to the generative, original possibilities of McCarthy's masterful pastiche of previous works, Steven Frye states "McCarthy selectively dismantles and reconfigures the great landmarks of literary art...and out of the shards and raw material he makes something distinctively his own" (*Understanding* 1). Thus, McCarthy's engagement with previous authors and works holds the possibility of new, engaging, original pieces of art.

Of McCarthy's borrowing or literary overlap, some is "general"—perhaps inevitable in all literature. Language is a vast network of signifiers and symbols, subjectively offering divergent meanings to its users and audiences. Literature, built as it is out of always-already networked words, cannot help but be referential to all other communication. As Michel Foucault puts it:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts,

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy has a reputation for being "very intelligent, extraordinarily well-read," and he "owns around ten-thousand books—many of them annotated" (Monk 103).

other sentences: it is a node within a network...The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. (23)

This declaration about a book's place in a network, however, does not differentiate between a work's intentional and unintentional presence in the "system of references." Indeed, Foucault and others would argue that, in most cases, a book's overlap with other works is not a choice that an author makes, but is rather an unavoidable effect of language and communication's networked nature.

While what Foucault is saying could apply to any work, I would argue that this discussion of McCarthy's purposeful engagement with Yeats can (and perhaps should) be viewed through the productive lens of adaptation. Because it dismantles and reconfigures another work to make something distinctively new, *No Country for Old Men* fits Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as "a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging" (8). Specifically, Hutcheon evokes the idea of the palimpsest, a document that has had one text copied over the top of another, resulting in a layered experience in which both works are simultaneously present, creating a third document. She calls the palimpsest a work that is "haunted at all times by [its] adapted texts," (6) and thus the palimpsestuous relationship is much more expansive than mere allusion or homage.

McCarthy, does, of course, engage in the "small intertextuality" of subtle references and allusions—for example, the appearance of a line echoing Wordsworth ("the child, the father of the man" (3)) on the first page of *Blood Meridian*<sup>8</sup>. However, more germane to the

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<sup>8</sup> Edwin Arnold calls this intertextuality ironic, because in its *Blood Meridian* context, the emphasis is on the violent nature of humanity, in opposition to the optimistic tenor of the source poem (62). This moment of brief interlocution between texts is exemplary of



present examination of Yeats and McCarthy as interlocutors, are examples of “big intertextuality” in McCarthy’s fiction—those instances where an entire work seems to be palimpsestuously present in McCarthy’s text, or, rather, when an entire McCarthy text appears to be responding to or re-envisioning a single previous work<sup>9</sup>. The arguments of Dennis Cutchins and Megan McGilchrist are suitable examples of analyses of such large-scale intertextuality. For example, Cutchins makes the case that McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* contains “similar relationships, characters, situations and themes” as Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (268). These novels both feature young American men who travel to recently revolutionized, Spanish-speaking countries; they both fall in love with local women, and must deal with the complicated fallout of their heroic exploits. Cutchins argues that McCarthy’s “rewriting” of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* engages in a “damning criticism of the code hero” (279) often found in Hemingway’s novels, and exposes “the problematic nature of the code itself” (289).

Cutchins’ analysis reveals fascinating congruencies between the two works, even pointing out sentence-level similarities and homages. If Cutchins is correct in his assertion of intentional, extensive intertextuality, then the fact that McCarthy would create a novel that interacts so thoroughly with another work may indicate just how important the issue

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McCarthy’s penchant for referencing voices that are relevant to the conversation he is entering, even if he then proceeds to subvert or disagree with such voices. Amy Hungerford highlights the juxtaposition of the Kid’s predisposed “taste for mindless violence” (McCarthy 3) and the “natural piety” spoken of by Wordsworth, reinforcing the idea of McCarthy as a responsive writer (Hungerford).

<sup>9</sup> Another example of this, albeit in a smaller scope, is Benjamin Burr’s argument that a brief scene in *Outer Dark* (in which Culla Holme has a run-in with a murderous gang intent on stealing his boots) is a “sophisticated aesthetic and moral critique” of the philosophy in Faulkner’s novel *A Light in August* (1).

to be “rediscussed” really is to him. And while making a definitive declaration of intentionality on McCarthy’s part may be problematic (if not impossible), the fact is that his works open themselves up to new and provocative readings when seen as responses to other texts, intentional or otherwise.

Megan McGilchrist makes a similar claim about the same novel, positing *All the Pretty Horses* as an intertext with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (McGilchrist). Both John Grady and Sir Gawain, she points out, enter a liminal space to find “that the ‘new’ world [they] find is in fact far older and more complex than the world [they] fled” (29). She notes that both John Grady and Sir Gawain are guided by a Code— of the Cowboy and Chivalric varieties, respectively—that eventually reveals itself to be paradoxical or insufficient in a land of foreign philosophies where “familiar referents are lost” (31-32). In addition, both heroes fall in love with an unattainable woman, battle man and nature during quests incited by powerful older females, and ultimately betray their hosts. I consider it significant that both Cutchins and McGilchrist—albeit through very different approaches—highlight what appears to be McCarthy’s critique of a cultural code celebrated in a previous text. This identified pattern supports my claim that *No Country for Old Men* offers a similar critique of Yeats’ view of humanity and individual character in the nuclear age.

Given the examples listed, the claim that McCarthy’s works are highly intertextual is clearly defensible. In addition, the claim that intertextuality functions in his works as a tool of advanced literary commentary is at least feasible, if not without debate. This deliberate and painstaking process of “dismantling and reconfiguring” allows McCarthy to engage with other authors, often to correct or question their works.

Thus we arrive at the main junction of the two works. The speaker in Yeats' poem seems to be offering an answer to the question that Sheriff Bell puzzles over throughout the novel: what's happening to the world, and is it only going to get worse? Yeats observes:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Each line in this first stanza contains a theme or idea that correlates with major elements of the novel. The opening two lines describe the iconic falcon, rising ever farther from its master. This metaphor, as has already been mentioned, is often seen as emblematic of society spiraling out of control. The literal bird of today's falconry is "a trained raptor," meaning that other birds such as eagles and hawks are also utilized ("What is Falconry?"). The red-tailed hawk is one of the most commonly used raptor in modern falconry ("Red-Tailed Hawk"), and McCarthy includes one in a brief portion of the novel that, at first reading, seems puzzling and superfluous to the narrative of this heavily plot-driven novel. While "driving out 90 towards the turnoff at Dryden" to visit yet another crime scene left in the wake of Chigurh and Moss's chase, Sheriff Bell comes across "a hawk dead in the road" (44). The bird is later identified as "a big redtail" (45). A dead falconry bird is a clever feature, one that ties the novel back to a central image in Yeats' "Second Coming."

If we accept that the presence of a falcon in the novel serves as a possible intertextual marker, Sheriff Bell's reaction to this bird can also be seen as a significant commentary on Yeats' poem. Bell stops his patrol car and picks up the dead bird "by one wingtip and carried it to the bar ditch and laid it in the grass...He wouldn't have the trucks running over it" (45). This moment of deference for nature not only indicates Bell's singular respect for animals (this regard is manifest earlier in the novel in his desire to shield his horses from seeing the carnage at the scene of a shootout (72)) but it also represents the specific manner in which McCarthy is engaging the philosophy espoused by "The Second Coming." If Yeats' falconer and unhearing bird represent a loss of order and control, then Bell's respect for the dead bird and his reluctance to see its body desecrated should be seen as emblematic of the possibility for altruism, order, and decency, even in a world where things seem, according to the Sheriff, to be "going to hell in a hand basket" (196).

This scene of Bell and the hawk contrasts sharply with Chigurh's encounter with another large bird, which is given in great detail:

The headlights picked up some kind of a large bird sitting on the aluminum bridgerail up ahead and Chigurh pushed the button to let the window down. Cool air coming in off the lake. He took the pistol from beside the box and cocked and leveled it out the window, resting the barrel on the rearview mirror . . . He fired just as the bird crouched and spread its wings. It flared wildly in the lights, very white, turning and lifting away into the darkness. The shot had hit the rail and caromed off into the night and the rail hummed dully in the slipstream and ceased. Chigurh laid the pistol in the seat and put the window back up again. (98-99)

Not only is this an act of brutality against a bird for no reason other than, perhaps, target practice, it also further aligns Chigurh with the decentering, chaotic force described in Yeats' poem. A falcon that will not return to its master's gauntlet is a representation of disorder and chaos. A man who would willfully kill the symbolic falcon is nothing less than "a true and living prophet of destruction" (McCarthy 4) who wishes to see "Mere anarchy...loosed upon the world" (Yeats 4). The contrast between the lawman and the badman is made clear through their interchange with these two birds<sup>10</sup>. Chigurh embodies the prophecy of destruction described by Yeats, but Bell breaks the barriers of pessimism through his deferential acts in a fallen world.

Ironically, Chigurh himself may be a symbolic embodiment of Yeats' unfettered falcon. Having been hired to recover the money, Chigurh's exceedingly violent and merciless behavior is distressing to the point that even his vindictive handlers find it untenable, calling him "a loose cannon" (140). With him spiraling more and more out of control, Chigurh's employers send in Carson Wells to, ironically, kill the rogue Chigurh in an attempt to restore order—an attempt that is ultimately unsuccessful. Chigurh obstinately flies beyond the sound of his masters' voice, and part of the novel's terror is the realization that Chigurh's ever-widening and increasingly violent gyre may be unstoppable, much like the irreversible gyre of Yeats' falcon.

In addition to falcons, the poem's next lines speak of chaos, anarchy, and things falling apart—ideas which we can productively equate with Bell's vision of "an omen of

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<sup>10</sup> Red-tail Hawks have an underbelly of white feathers, and the narrator's comment that the "very white" bird that turns and lifts away from the potshot supports the idea that this unidentified bird may have been another red-tail. The other plausible identity of a "large bird" with a white underbelly would be a barn owl. These are common in parts of Texas (although less-so in Terrell county, where the book takes place) and would be easily identifiable, and thus be unlikely to be identified as just "some large bird."

things to come. Things losing shape. Taking you with them” (127). Bell’s repeated puzzling over humanity’s state leads him to the Yeatsian conclusion that “I just have this feelin we’re looking at something we really aint never even seen before,” (46) and that “there ain’t nothing short of the second coming of Christ that can slow this train” (159). Over and over Bell makes statements that bemoan the decentering and the chaos he sees around him: “Here the other day they was a woman put her baby in a trash compactor. Who would think of such a thing?” (40). He constantly broods over “the way the country is headed” (197) and the fact that humanity is “ill prepared for what is to come” (295). He struggles for “some notion of where the ride’s going” (265) or to merely understand “how it’s fixin to get” (296), “what’s comin down the pike” (4), or “what might be headed this way” (40). Bell mourns the fact that some police officers are “getting rich off of narcotics” and he claims that such things weren’t happening “even ten years ago” (216). The Sheriff contrasts the past with his current age, and, similar to Yeats, his clear conclusion is that society is losing its center, rapidly falling into chaos and anarchy.

Yeats’ fifth and sixth lines speak of bloodshed and loss of innocence, but in the context of *No Country for Old Men*, we may as well speak about the loss of innocents. The body count in this novel is high, and, tragically, many of the slain are innocent bystanders. Carla Jean is the principle innocent lost in the crossfire, but others include the nameless old woman shot accidentally through her window (147), and the young hitchhiker that is “shot dead” at the hotel pool (238). About the murdered hitchhiker, Sheriff Bell remarks that “I can think of no reason in the world for that no-good to have killed that girl. What did she ever do to him?” (281). Yeats’ drowned innocence is certainly to be found in the dead bystanders left in Moss and Chigurh’s wake.

Another significant element of philosophical overlap between the two works is Anton Chigurh and his embodiment of Yeats' Antichrist, spoken of in the poem's final lines. Jim Welsh—in one of the few extant scholarly juxtapositions of McCarthy and Yeats—describes Chigurh as “the very personification of the Antichrist, that slouching “rough beast” of Yeats’ (74). The various iterations of Christian theology disagree as to the exact nature of the Antichrist discussed in the scriptures<sup>11</sup>, but the range of conceptions includes both “the lawless man” who claims to be God or his replacement, or “the beast from the abyss” (Patte 54). These two notions of the incarnate antichrist certainly address both Yeats' slouching, sphinxlike beast and McCarthy's nihilistic, well-spoken psychopath. Indeed, Chigurh's philosophy seems to stand totally opposed to a Christian conception of how the universe works. He rejects any notion of repentance, grace, or forgiveness, opting to serve a sterner god—his own model of undeviating justice. Before the coin toss that will lead to the murder of Carla Jean, he shows her both heads and tails “for her to see the justice of it” (258). Chigurh seeks to distance himself from his actions—murder of an innocent woman in this case—by a system of objectivity. Even linguistically, the killer claims impartiality. In a disagreement with a gas station owner over a question of semantics Chigurh declares, “I don't have some way to put. That's the way it is” (55). When that shopkeep's life is on the line in a coin toss, the endeavor is declared “fair” because Chigurh allowed the man to call the toss (56). Calling this enterprise fair makes Chigurh appear objective—he follows the will of the coin—but, of course, the endeavor itself is entered into at Chigurh's insistence. When Carla Jean (correctly) suggests that Chigurh

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of an antichrist is treated throughout scripture (Thessalonians, Revelation, Matthew), but the term proper is only used a handful to times: 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7.

could ignore the result of the coin toss, he refutes her while simultaneously distancing himself from the consequences of the toss, saying, “it could have gone either way” (258). Thus, the hired killer is supremely Antichrist through his rejection of mercy, forgiveness, or even a meaningful world. Speaking to Carla Jean, he rejects her suggestion for an act of mercy, declaring, “You are asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn’t allow for special cases” (259). His worldview puts a twisted concept of fate and justice in the driver’s seat, thus absolving him—at least as far as he’s concerned—of all culpability.

The Antichristian Chigurh—the “true and living prophet of destruction” (4)—is part of what causes Bell’s to “wake up sometimes way in the night and...know as certain as death that there ain’t nothing short of the second coming of Christ that can slow this train” (159). Bell’s direct reference of the Christian Second Coming not only strengthens a Yeatsian reading of the novel, but also marks the principal schism in the philosophies espoused in the novel and in the poem. Despite Sheriff Bell’s repeated uncertainty about the future, (“I don’t have no...idea of the world that is brewin out there” [283]) the novel itself rejects the calamitous, Yeatsian worldviews expressed by Bell and represented by Chigurh.

Indeed, Bell himself—despite his fatalistic worrying about what rough beast might be “comin down the pike” (4), and “what might be headed this way” (40)—can be seen as a strong refutation of Yeats worries about the future. “The Second Coming” bemoans the state of the world, declaring, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity” (7-8). *No Country for Old Men* specifically and fundamentally responds to this idea through the three main characters: Moss, Chigurh, and, (most importantly) Bell.



These three characters run the spectrum from best and worst, and from lacking to possessing passionate intensity. For instance, Moss and Chigurh are two men who don't know when to quit, and will go to any lengths to accomplish what they set out to do—in other words, both men possess passionate intensity. When Bell confronts Carla Jean with the reality that the drug cartel won't relent in their quest to kill Moss, Carla Jean replies "He wont [quit] neither. He never has"<sup>12</sup> (127). In a parallel passage, Wells tells Moss that Chigurh, "wont stop looking for you. Even if he gets the money back. It wont make any difference to him" (150). Thus, McCarthy sets up the classic conundrum of the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object—neither will yield. The lament in Yeats' poem would seem to celebrate individuals with the passionate intensity of Moss and Chigurh, and yet the implications of the intensity of these two men seems to undermine the value of such a characteristic.

McCarthy's pitting of these characters against each other offers the reader a chance to analyze the problems with this type of rigorous code adherence. As Cutchins suggests, John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses* is another character that demonstrates the pitfalls of overly headstrong persistence and stick-to-itiveness. Both *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men* critique the American appreciation for unrelenting devotion to an ideal. *No Country for Old Men* accomplishes this by contrasting unstoppable Chigurh and immovable Moss with Sheriff Bell, arguably the most admirable figure in the novel, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ironically, these characteristics of Moss are exactly what get Carla Jean killed, and McCarthy hints at Moss's problematic behavior early in the novel during the antelope hunt. Moss is overzealous (possibly overconfident) and takes a risky shot that wounds an animal and causes it to suffer. McCarthy has told us much of what we need to know about Moss and his reckless character through this-hunting scene. Moss' passionate intensity causes collateral damage wherever he goes.

man who is willing to walk away from a fight, even if that means he sees himself as a failure, someone lacking in conviction.

There are three significant instances in the novel that illustrate Bell's "lack of conviction," although it is important to make clear that while that label could connote cowardice or vacillation, neither accurately describes Bell. He is an estimable man of action, but his action is cautiously measured, and comes with a healthy dose of rational self-protection. It is with good reason that Bell is one of the only men in the novel to reach a mature age, the rest are slain before they can become the titular "old men" of Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium."

First, let us consider Bell's account of "actually what happened" (274) during his combat experience during the Second World War that won him the Bronze Star. At the end of the novel, Sheriff Bell confesses that as a young soldier facing almost certain death during a hopeless combat mission, he fled rather than stay and give his life. After a German artillery shell destroys the house he and his men were hiding in, young Bell single-handedly fights off a group of approaching German soldiers. Once night falls, he chooses to run rather than searching for any survivors among his men, recognizing that the enemy would have "come up in the dark and lobbed grenades in on me. Or maybe gone back up in the woods and called in another [artillery] round" (276). The aged Sheriff appreciates that staying would have almost certainly been a death sentence, and even if he had risked death by staying, it likely would have been futile, because he probably "couldn't have helped [his men]" (277). Despite the fact that he was outgunned, outmanned, and his decision to flee allowed him to fight another day, Bell deeply regrets his choice, remarking that "some part of me has never quit wishin I could go back" (278). Bell's actions in the war reflect his

unwillingness to behave with unrelenting intensity, as Chigurh or Moss likely would have. Both of these men are described as incapable of turning their back on a fight, even a doomed one. However Bell may feel about this decision, it is consistent with other similar choices he makes throughout the novel.

For instance, Bell has a second hopeless run-in, this time as sheriff, and it his choice his earlier decision as a young soldier to retreat. Bell describes his attempt to pull over a suspicious pickup truck, but no sooner are his squad car lights turned on than the passengers in the rear of the truck open fire with a shotgun. The Sheriff manages to duck the incoming shots and his car crashes into a ditch. He narrowly escapes with his life, and after the ordeal he chooses to head to a nearby diner for a much-needed cup of coffee rather than pursue the assailants (40). The Sheriff admits that “maybe I should have took out after” the carload of murderous criminals, and, years later, he is still unsure about his decision (39). Bell’s choice not to get back on the road and give chase seems reasonable, considering the logistics of the showdown—a single officer attempting to simultaneously drive and wield a service pistol would have been no match against a group of well-armed men with a head start. Bell is once again outgunned and outnumbered, and his decision not to give chase is yet another sound tactical move, even if it doesn’t win him the title of passionate, heroic martyr.

A final, crowning example of Bell’s willingness to choose the path that some (including himself) might consider to be without conviction is his retirement from law enforcement, a decision made under Chigurh’s shadow. Bell quits for the assurance that he “wont be called on to hunt this man” (282), testifying that

Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again. I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him (4)

Bell repeatedly refuses to fight to the death, choosing instead another path. And he has a name for that path—"Defeat" (306). While I would disagree with the Sheriff on this point, it is clear that he sees himself as lacking the conviction to do "what [he'd] give his word to do" (278), and, in his final showdown, as being unequal to the passionately intense Chigurh.

At some level, it seems that Sheriff Bell wishes to be more like Moss and Chigurh, although he would likely not put it that way. He comments (as a good code adherent should), that "If I was supposed to die over there doing what I'd give my word to do then that's what I should of done" (278). And yet, were Bell to have followed that path, he would have died several times over, either as a soldier or a peace officer. Thus, Yeats' poem would condemn those like Chigurh, and maybe even Moss, the 'worst who is full of passionate intensity', but it also implicates Bell, one of the 'best who lacks conviction'.

Thus McCarthy has, in novel form, embodied some of the most troubling elements of Yeats' philosophy. Just as his other novels can be seen as critiques of the masculine code championed by Hemingway and countless westerns, I contend that *No Country for Old Men* here evaluates a similar notion put forward by Yeats that compromise, restraint, and tempered passion are flaws that place humanity on a downward spiral toward destruction. McCarthy offers alternatives to both of these theories. By anthropomorphizing elements of Yeats' poem into denizens of west Texas, McCarthy allows the reader to see the implications of the poem's underlying philosophy of code adherence. Perhaps compromise

and restraint are postmodern virtues that Yeats' speaker could not appreciate (or that prevalent interpretations of the poem do not champion), but McCarthy sees both qualities as necessary for survival in a world of danger, dilemma, and contradictions. And this does not refer strictly to survival of the individual in such a society, but the wellbeing of society itself, and the strength of social cohesion.

Viewing McCarthy in these ways—as a direct response to Yeats' work and underlying philosophy—offers insight into both texts. Of course, the reading put forward here is by no means the only way to view *No Country for Old Men* nor "The Second Coming." However, there is value in approaching *any* text with an eye for its location in a network of intertexts, and McCarthy's works in particular open themselves up to new and exciting readings when approached in this way. The fascinating connections between *No Country for Old Men* and "The Second Coming" invites the reader to see McCarthy's novel as a rebuttal of the eschatological spirit often associated with Yeats' poem.

In a 1992 interview with *The New York Times* McCarthy said that "the ugly fact is that books are made of other books," ("Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction") and this examination has endeavored to show that *No Country for Old Men* is no exception to this truism that texts tend to incorporate elements of other texts. However, some critics would argue that the intertextual parallels that I have highlighted between McCarthy's novel and "The Second Coming" merely underscore the fact that *No Country for Old Men* contains, as Harold Bloom put it, unfortunate "apocalyptic moral judgments" that are "sort of a falling away on McCarthy's part" (qtd. in Pierce). My reading, however, ultimately proposes that McCarthy's novel suggests a more optimistic outlook, one that refutes such apocalyptic moral judgments. *No Country for Old Men* seems to contend that a view of the world as an

irreversible downward spiral may be too naïve, and that a fatalistic attitude toward inescapable social and cultural disaster (one that could be easily gleaned from “The Second Coming”) is not only inadequate for understanding our age, but may actually be dangerous. In that same *New York Times* interview, McCarthy declared,

There's no such thing as life without bloodshed...I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous. (“Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”)

As paradoxical as it may sound, this acceptance of violence reflects McCarthy’s strange optimism. He sees anxious attempts to return to an idyllic past as dangerous and enslaving. The implication is that one must accept the often harsh) realities of existence, and not pretend that they can be totally avoided. Thus, for McCarthy, humanity is neither getting worse nor better, but rather has always existed in a somewhat static state—a mixed tapestry of evil and altruism. If that sounds like a cold view of things, I am inclined to agree with the novel’s Uncle Ellis—“it’s no colder than what the facts [call] for” (281).

Perhaps this is why it’s an “ugly fact” that books are made of other books: civilization continues to struggle with the same questions, and each author’s answer is in conversation with those of previous writers. McCarthy’s very method of responding to predecessors’ works is a strong argument for this idea. Specifically, McCarthy’s interaction with “The Second Coming” shows that his answer to the question “where is humanity headed?” differs from that put forward by Yeats a generation before. His readers have the

duty to take these new answers to old questions and, as Sheriff Bell puts it repeatedly throughout the novel, to “think about it a good deal” (4, 307). *No Country for Old Men* offers a subtle but powerful critique of eschatological obsession, urging its readers to be wary of any apocalyptic handwringing about the future. One justification for such wariness may lie in the dangerous apathy that could result from overblown eschatological fears. A worry that the world is on a crash course to destruction could result in a drain on hope, morality, altruism, civil society. Myopia concerning one’s age can result in missed opportunities for goodness, or, worse still, seized opportunities for wickedness.

*No Country for Old Men* approaches a paradigm—in this case, the idea that society is rotting, that the good ol’ days are gone, and that our sad state is cause for despair—and asks readers to examine the implications of such an idea. “The Second Coming” has become an iconic embodiment of this worldview, and its popularity (re-tweets and all) indicates its prevalence. The novel asks that readers not “give up their souls” over concerns for a failing society, since such perceived failures could be overblown. Rather, *No Country for Old Men* invites personal decency and altruism, even in the face of large-scale problems, perceived or otherwise. Because, after all, “maybe we are all of us lookin through the wrong end of the glass. Always have been...you fix what you can fix and you let the rest go” (283).

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