

No Country for Old Men: Discussion Questions

1. One of the first reviews in 2005 described the book as "profoundly disturbing". What is it about the story and the way McCarthy tells it that is so unsettling? What are its themes? Was the plot hard to follow?
2. The story is set in South Texas. Could it have taken place in another time and place? How does the story deviate from the usual genre (Western). What's with the focus on weapons?
3. What are some of the most striking images and dialogues in the book?
4. Why do you think the author relies on dialogue to advance the story? Did you find the absence of punctuation confusing? How would you describe McCarthy's writing style?
5. McCarthy will often tell the reader that one of his characters is "thinking things over" without revealing what the character is thinking (e.g. Bell on p. 107). What does he gain by leaving out such information?
6. Are there any similarities among the three main characters' points of view? (Chigurh, Bell, Moss). Are they archetypes? Whose internal dialogue was the most compelling?
7. How can Anton Chigurh's behavior be explained? What motivates him? Is he a "true and living prophet of destruction"? (Page 4) In what ways does he challenge Bell's worldview and values? How does he regard his victims? Why does he have such a long conversation with Carla Jean?
8. On p. 220 Moss tells the Hitchhiker, "Things happen to you. They don't ask first. They don't require your permission." Have things "happened" to Moss or does he play a more active role in his fate? Does his life seem fated?
9. What motivates Bell to attempt to protect Moss and Carla Jean? In what ways does Bell's past affect his present actions? The story takes place in 1980. Do you agree with his belief that the country and society were/are getting worse? How do you view Bell at the story's end?
10. Are there any characteristics unifying the women in the story (Carla Jean, Loretta, the Hitchhiker, Aunt Caroline)? Are they archetypes, also?
11. Is the story ultimately redemptive or does Evil triumph? In Bell's final dialogue with Uncle Ellis, they discuss whether G-d has abandoned them. Where is the deity in this story?
12. This book is sometimes taught in conjunction with Plato's Republic, with its questions of morality and justice. Do you see any parallels?

W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium". 1933

I.

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
--Those dying generations--at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.