



ISSN: 1994-4217 (Print) 2518-5586(online)

Journal of College of Education

Available online at: <https://eduj.uowasit.edu.iq>

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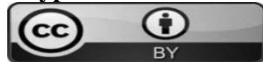
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Keywords:

**Absurdism , Albert
Camus , Cormac
McCarthy, Myth of
Sisyphus.**



Article info

Article history:

Received 28.May.2025

Accepted 8.Jul.2025

Published 25.Aug. 2025



Embracing Chaos: An Absurdist Interpretation of Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men

A B S T R A C T

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) aligns closely with Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd as portrayed in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). This paper argues that the novel goes beyond being a mere crime-thriller novel to become a philosophical inquiry into the futility of moral order, the randomness of violence, and the existential disillusionment of its characters. The analysis will focus on the three main characters of the novel and considers their part in the wider absurd universe of the novel. Anton Chigurh is an embodiment of the absurd—an indifferent, almost metaphysical agent of chaos who operates beyond reason or morality. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell represents the nostalgic yearning for moral clarity that ultimately proves inadequate in the face of modern brutality. Meanwhile, Llewelyn Moss functions as an absurd hero, whose tragic awareness and defiance in the face of inevitable defeat mirrors the struggle of Camus's Sisyphus. By examining these characters and the philosophical dilemmas they represent, this paper reveals how *No Country for Old Men* dramatizes the confrontation between human longing for meaning and a universe that offers nothing but silence in reply.

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DOI: [https:// doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol60.Iss2.4523](https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol60.Iss2.4523)

احتضان الفوضى: تفسير عبثي لرواية كورماك مكارثي "لا بلد لكبار السن"

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مديرية تربية محافظة ذي قار

المستخلص

تتماشى رواية كورماك مكارثي لا بلد للعجائز (٢٠٠٥) بشكل وثيق مع فلسفة العبث لألبير كامو كما وردت في كتابه أسطورة سيزيف (١٩٤٢). تجادل هذه الورقة بأن الرواية تتجاوز كونها مجرد رواية جريمة وإثارة، لتصبح تحقيقاً فلسفياً في عبثية النظام الأخلاقي، وعشوائية العنف، وخيبة الأمل الوجودية التي يعاني منها شخصياتها. يركز التحليل على الشخصيات الرئيسية الثلاث في الرواية ويدرس دورها في الكون العبثي الواسع للرواية. يمثل أنتون شيغور رمزاً للعبث — وكيل فوضوي غير مبالٍ، يشبه الكائن الميتافيزيقي الذي يعمل خارج نطاق العقل أو الأخلاق. أما الشريف إد توم بيل فيجسد الحنين الحزين إلى وضوح أخلاقي يتبين في النهاية عدم كفايته أمام الوحشية الحديثة. في حين يعمل لويلين موس كبطل عبثي، حيث يعكس وعيه المأساوي وتحديه في مواجهة الهزيمة الحتمية صراع سيزيف عند كامو. من خلال دراسة هذه الشخصيات والمآزق الفلسفية التي تمثلها، تكشف هذه الورقة كيف تجسد رواية "لا بلد للعجائز" الصراع بين شوق الإنسان إلى المعنى وكون لا يقدم سوى الصمت في الرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العبثية ، ألبير كامو ، كورماك مكارثي ، أسطورة سيزيف.

1. Introduction

While Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) is often cited as his masterpiece, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) represents a culmination of the violence that characterises his early works with the deeply philosophical writing of his *Border Trilogy* and the apocalyptic world depicted in his *The Road* (2006).

No Country for Old Men follows Llewelyn Moss, who on one of his hunting trips, stumbles on a suitcase filled with money in the middle of a drug deal gone wrong. Llewelyn's decision to take the briefcase makes him a target for hired hitman Anton Chigurh which sets off a chain of violent events. Meanwhile, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell finds himself in a state of philosophical perplexity due to the rising violence and questions his place (and that of law and order) amid all of this.

The novel goes beyond being a mere action-packed crime fiction to include deep philosophical questions. The novel's barren landscape, the randomness of life and death, the senseless violence, and the absence of justice and order lends this novel well to the philosophy of absurdism as stated by Albert Camus specially in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

Absurdism as a philosophy appeared in the the mid twentieth century, as a response to the disillusionment that followed catastrophic outcomes of both the First and Second World

Wars. In the midst of all this, Albert Camus in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, diagnosed an irreconcilable chasm between the instinctual human need for order clarity and meaning in a universe that offers nothing of that sort. This absurdity of human existence, is defined by Camus (1955), as “the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (p. 20), a definition that captures the essence of the absurd and continues to serve as a cornerstone of postwar existential philosophy.

Camus’s answer to this existential crisis which he calls “the most urgent of all matters” takes the form of one of three responses. Firstly, there is the option suicide which Camus (1955) dubs as the “one truly serious philosophical problem” that needs to be answered (p. 4). Camus rejects this option as suicide is a form surrender to absurdity instead of embracing and revolting against it. As Camus (2013) wrote in his novel *A Happy Death*: “sometimes it takes more courage to live than to shoot yourself” (p. 54)

The second option Camus (1955) identifies (but equally objects) is what he terms as philosophical suicide (p. 33). This option entails a leap of faith expressed mainly through religious or spiritual beliefs. A philosopher that embodies this approach is Søren Kierkegaard whom Camus acknowledges as having successfully diagnosed the absurdity of human existence yet failed to deal with it properly. Camus (1955) alleges that Kierkegaard and other Existentialist unsuccessfully handled the absurd since “all of them without exception suggest escape” through a “forced hope” that is religious in nature (p. 22).

This attempt to reconcile the absurdity of life stems from an instinctual human desire Camus (1955) terms as “nostalgia for unity” (p.13). Nostalgia for unity is a human yearning logic, reason, absolutes, purpose and meaning in a universe that offers none. It is the human attempt to escape the harsh fact of life’s absurdity through a nostalgia for something that never existed in the first place.

The third option is to revolt through living with the absurdity of life without any appeal to a higher authority. Revolt entails a lucid confrontation with the absurd deprived of illusions hope or escapism: “The revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (Camus, 1955, p. 36)

Camus uses—a figure condemned to push a boulder up a mountain for eternity—as a metaphor for human existence. In Camus’s view, Sisyphus embodies the absurd hero, who, despite the futility of his task, persists without appeal to a higher order:

This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself, forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (Camus, 1955, p. 111)

This paper argues that *No Country for Old Men* (2005) embodies the principles of Absurdism through its portrayal of random violence, the futility of morality, and the existential crisis experienced by its characters.

2. Discussion

2.1 Anton Chigurh: The Living Representation of the Absurd

Anton Chigurh, through his crimes, can be considered more an agent of the absurd than merely a character within the narrative. His cold and indifferent demeanor mirrors that of the absurdist world portrait in the novel. He's described as a person that can kill at a heartbeat a characterization that demonstrates how emotionally detached and terrifyingly indifferent he is when it comes to other people's lives.

Much like Camus' absurd universe, there is no underlying logic or reason behind Chigurh's actions. Steven Frye, (2009) states: "Chigurh becomes an omnipresent force of evil that is metaphysical by implication" (pp. 158–159). Chigurh, in essence, "follows his own internal code, which lacks compassion and humanity" (Rajabova, 2025, p.925). For Chigurh killing comes as a second nature and instinctual. (Monk, 2016, p. 83). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the coin toss scenes.

Anton Chigurh coin tosses have become a trade mark of his character embodying his approach to life. When Chigurh senses that the gas station proprietor might be aware of his next destination, he forces the proprietor to "call it" in a coin toss that will determine whether he will live or die (McCarthy, 2005, p. 47). The proprietor, unaware of what's at stake asks "for what?" Chigurh's reply, devoid of human empathy or explanation, is simply, "Just call it" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 47).

Chigurh's interaction with the proprietor epitomizes the core of absurdist philosophy: the conflict between the human desire for meaning and reason and the silent indifference of the universe. Chigurh, acting as an agent of chance or fate, strips the moment of all rational or moral grounding. Humans are thrust into a world without inherent purpose and must grapple with its absurdity. The coin, a symbol of randomness, becomes the sole determinant of life or death, underscoring the futility of searching for order in a world governed by chaos. Through the coin toss scene, the narrative does not only depict absurdity; it forces the readers to feel its cold, inescapable weight.

Chigurh not only refuses to abide by the rules of those around him, he also despises them: When Chigurh manages to capture Carson Wells and is preparing to kill him he asks: "If the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?" Furthermore, Wells' attempt to negotiate for his life fall on deaf ears. Chigurh mocks Wells' reliance on conventional logic and ethics, and his attempt to persuade him with money as it is all meaningless in Chigurh's view.

Even the characters who fall victim to Chigurh's cattle gun are but mere "stock to death's handyman" (Lincoln, 2009, p. 146) lacking any resemblance of agency and control over their fate (Greenwood, 2009, p. 142).

2.2 Sheriff Bell and the Crumbling of Moral Order

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell represents the very opposite to everything Anton Chigurh stands for. He embodies a vanishing world view of world of traditional morality, justice, and order. Bell is deeply attached to an older, much simpler clearer moral framework—one that divides

the world into right and wrong, good and evil. He believes in upholding justice and order through honour, decency and integrity.

Bell's *nostalgia for unity* (as Camus terms it), is a dominating attribute in his character. He constantly compares his time against a romanticized past when morality and law seemed clearer and more effective. Bell craving for a time when "some of the old time sheriffs never even wore a gun" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 202). suggests a historical period where societal norms and a shared societal respect for authority, were sufficient to maintain a sound social order. He constantly laments the decline of basic civility and the absence of traditional values in the current days, noting that "Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight"(McCarthy, 2005, p. 262). For Bell, the erosion of these basic societal courtesies are signs of a deeper unraveling of the societal fabric. Bell struggles comprehend the new, senseless violence he encounters. He states, " 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" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 69).

Bell's inability to comprehend the new form of evil points to something far more profound than a mere increase in crime. It is a sign of an erosion of a shared moral language and the collapse of common values. Bell, consequently "becomes disillusioned and forlorn especially when he witnesses the work of Chigurh, which shows a change in the social and cultural composition of society" (Mangrum, 2011, p. 112).

Anton Chigurh, and by extension the absurd, operate entirely outside any comprehensible moral framework of Bell. This suggests that Bell's *nostalgia for unity* is not merely a sentimental longing for a simpler past, but a desperate yearning for a past where a shared moral consensus made human actions, even those deemed evil, understandable within a common, albeit challenged, framework. The absence of this shared understanding renders his world alien and his efforts as a lawman increasingly futile.

Nevertheless, Bell does seem to be able to realize that his ethical worldview no longer fits the present age and experiences a sense of spiritual disillusionment, particularly concerning his faith: "I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didn't. I don't blame him. If I was him I'd have the same opinion about me that he does" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 202). Furthermore, he arduously grapples with his personal and professional limitations and fears, confessing, " I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him. It aint just bein older. I wish that it was. I cant say that it' s even what you are willin to do" (p. 7).

This reveals his deep moral exhaustion and his unwavering commitment to protecting his "soul" or moral integrity from the corrupting influence of the incomprehensible evil. His eventual retirement is a direct consequence of his recognition of his "powerlessness over the forces of evil in the world". Iryna Kachur (2023) adds another reason behind his retirement: "this moral dilemma of inconsistency of what should be right and what is really right makes Bell resign as he no longer sees a point in performing the duties of a sheriff" (p.181)

Bell's profound admission of the limits of his traditional approach to justice points to a painful yet much needed recognition of the futility of his nostalgia for unity. Safeen Arif notes: "The recursions that Bell frequently makes to the past to recapture some of its

vividness and intimacy intensify his suffering and denies him any chance for revival” (p.9). Bell himself eventually becomes aware of this fact: “All the time you spend tryin to get back what’s been took from you there’s more goin out the door” (McCarthy, 2005, p. 233).

2.3 Llewelyn Moss; The Tragic Absurd Hero

Llewelyn Moss, on the other hand, emerges as a prominent example of an absurd hero revolting against absurdity through defiance. Moss’s defiance starts his rejection of conventional. He does not miss on the opportunity to take the suitcase of money while at the same time being fully aware of the destructive consequences that might follow his action. In essence he is fully aware that he "is now impoverished, stunted, and beset with fears and apprehensions" (Hillier, 2017, p. 174).

Unlike most traditional tragic or heroic figures, Moss does not seek justice, or moral redemption. His decision is not grounded in hope or belief in a higher purpose but in personal agency and a clear-eyed acceptance of risk. He is fully aware of life’s futility yet persists on striving on: “I’m fixin’ to do something dumber than hell, but I’m goin’ anyways” (McCarthy, 2005, p. 221). Arif (2022) further notices:

Moss is sadly aware that keeping the money has just forced him to a situation where many things will neither be the same as they used to be in the past nor will they be necessarily available as sacrifices that have to be presently made (p.15),

Unlike traditional heroes, Moss’s struggle does not result in transcendence or moral insight. He is denied a heroic death and is instead killed off-page and without any climactic hero versus villain showdown that dominate most western genre novels.

He sat there looking at it and then he closed the flap and sat with his head down. His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel. (McCarthy, 2005, p. 17).

Greenwood (2009) further notices that the "main characters rarely interact with each other, and there is no confrontation or showdown between any of [them]" (p. 74). Yet it is precisely this indifference that gives Moss’s actions weight. Much like Sisyphus pushing his rock, Moss continues his fight not because he believes he will win, but because the struggle itself affirms his freedom and agency.

3. Conclusion:

No Country for Old Men goes beyond being a mere modern Western or a violent crime narrative to encapsulate philosophical meditation on the absurdity of human existence. The novel positions Anton Chigurh as an agent of meaninglessness and random fate, challenging both the characters and readers to confront a world where morality and justice have lost their anchoring power. Sheriff Bell’s disillusionment and eventual resignation signal the collapse of a traditional worldview based on moral certainties and shared values. His yearning for a bygone era of honor and order underscores Camus’s idea of a “nostalgia for unity” in a disordered world. In contrast, Llewelyn Moss—aware of the risks and absurdity of his

actions—chooses to persist, not out of hope, but from a tragic commitment to personal agency. Much like Camus's Sisyphus, Moss affirms his humanity through resistance rather than redemption. Ultimately, McCarthy's novel forces a confrontation with the limits of reason, justice, and faith in a world governed by chance. In doing so, it offers a bleak but deeply philosophical vision of human existence—one in which the struggle itself, rather than the outcome, gives life its value.

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