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Law of the Outlaws:

Perversion, Subversion and Social Relations

in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*

As the ninth novel composed by Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* is a Western story that represents how people struggle for a living on the border of not only the nation but also the laws that sustain the society. McCarthy divides the text into two worlds by constructing opposite structures: the external framework presented by Sheriff Bell who recollects and comments on his life experiences and expresses his nostalgia for the good old days, and the internal world that depicts the cool-blooded society of crime, violence and death by focusing on the serial killer Anton Chigurh and his victims. In the novel McCarthy creates the protagonists who can be categorized by three types of people according to their identities in the social system based on law. Ed Tom Bell is an old sheriff who spends almost his whole life sustaining laws while at the same time sadly and disappointedly witnessing the corruption of the society which used to be simple and plain. On the contrary, the brutal villain Anton Chigurh has never lived under the sovereignty of laws; instead, he chooses to create and follow a new set of rules to fight against the social order that intends to discipline every one of its members. As for Llewelyn Moss, a welder who accidently meets a group of drug dealers after a gunplay and then takes their money away, he is a man in-between and actually has no choices but keeps escaping from the pursuit of both the law enforcer Sheriff Bell and the outlaw hitman Chigurh. The different attitudes of the protagonists and especially that of Chigurh toward the social order which, in a Lacanian perspective, can be considered as the

father's law, create the possibility to redefine not only the boundary of law but also people who wander through or transgress the law. McCarthy creates a disciplined villain who fights against the fixed definition of social order and directly presents the villain's conflict with individuals and the whole society through violence and death. Therefore, through reexamining the illegal violence in the internal story and its conflict with the social justice that constructs the external framework, this essay intends to reconstruct the social relations between subjects and the Other in a psychoanalytic viewpoint.

As a Western novel, male figures unsurprisingly play important roles in the work. Among the three protagonists, the controversial character Anton Chigurh earns much more discussions than the others. Focusing on the violence that exists all over the novel, the critic John Cant states that "*No Country for Old Men* is indeed a death-haunted text" (55) and that Chigurh "is death personified" (56). Jean Welch also claims that "[Chigurh] is a force and a presence that goes well beyond the banality of an ordinary assassin or bounty haunter. Like Death itself, he is larger than life, not merely a stereotype, but an allegorical abstraction" (74). A Foucauldian analysis reveals that Chigurh is being regarded as the representative of death because he transgresses civil law, which is the only sovereignty that has the "power of life and death" and the "right to take life or let live" (*The History of Sexuality* 136). In short, the feeling of thriller caused by the villain comes not from the merciless crimes committed by him, but from his intention to subvert the whole system of rules that sustain the society through violent behaviors.

However, although Chigurh is an outlaw who is excluded by the law, he unconsciously helps sustain the system because the subjectivity and wholeness of the law can only be constructed by the existence of something that is excluded from the system. The irony is that, as a policeman whose job is to maintain the law, sheriff Bell's social role and its necessity is in fact built on Chigurh's transgression of the law. Although Bell spends his lifetime on stopping crimes wholeheartedly, deep in his mind he is wishing that crimes and violence

would never disappear; otherwise, his social role would dissolve with the disappearance of sins and evils. In short, it is the exclusion that reinforces the subjectivity and necessity of the system itself.

In addition to the focuses on male characters, another necessary element of the Western or crime novel is gun. Due to the male phallic trust in powerful weapons, both Moss and Chigurh are deeply dependent on guns to not only protect their own lives but also take the ones from others. However, Chigurh's specially made cattle gun, which used to be the tool of slaughtermen to kill animals in slaughterhouses, deserves more discussions here. By using the cattle gun to kill people, Chigurh "is truing them into livestock, denying their humanity" (229) as critic Joy Ellis states in his article about fetishism in the novel. Therefore, Chigurh may not consider himself a professional hitman because he is a hunter who insists on killing his victims at any cost whether they are human beings or animals.

To make a deeper and closer discussion on the protagonist Chigurh and his social relation, it is necessary to go back to the very beginning of the text. The novel opens with the monologue of an aged sheriff, Ed Tom Bell, who recalls witnessing the death of a young boy who had killed his girlfriend with no reason. The boy told Bell before his execution that "he had been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again. Said he knew he was going to hell" (McCarthy 3). As an experienced sheriff, Bell can sense the change of the world around him and the great evil that he is going to confront with when he says that "[s]omewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he is real"(4). The "real" Bell refers to here is undoubtedly the imaginary real identified by Žižek. Bell knows very well that the "living prophet of destruction" exists in the world, but the perverse image is too traumatic for him to mentally perceive and directly confront with. His monologue foreshadows the destructive image of Chigurh, and the subversion of the social order that Bell sustains while Chigurh fights against.

Right after Bell's monologue is the emergence of Anton Chigurh, a sociopathic hitman who is taken to the police office by the deputy after the policeman finds him carrying a weird weapon. Chigurh kills the deputy with the handcuff and then steals the police patrol car. On the interstate Chigurh randomly picks up a car and then hits the siren of the patrol car to make the driver stop. He pretends to be an officer to ask the driver to step out of his car and then shoots him with a special weapon which, according to the dead deputy, looks "like one of them oxygen tanks for emphysema or whatever. Then he had a hose that run down the inside of his sleeve and went to one of them stunguns like they use at the slaughterhouse" (5). The deputy's descriptions of the weapon both express the difficulty of how to translate an image of the imaginary real into the symbolic system through language and present the unusual features of Chigurh.

On his way to track down Moss, Chigurh stops in a filling station and then has a talk with the proprietor. Suddenly he suggests the confused shop owner to play coin toss with him in the middle of the conversation. When the proprietor confusedly asks him why he is involved in the game and what is the meaning of it, Chigurh raises a question to him:

> You know what the date is on this coin?
>
> No.
>
> It's nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it. (56)

Here Chigurh presents his belief in determinism and, as critic Linda Woodson states, "sees himself not as having the power to pull together the strings of an absolute destiny, but rather as an 'instrument' of that which has already been determined" (Woodson 6). He believes that his being in the gas station with a coin to decide the life and death of the proprietor is not a coincidence, but he is not quite sure whether he should kill the man or not; therefore, he chooses to follow the direction given by fate. Fortunately, the man survives just because he is

lucky enough to makes a right choice in the coin-toss game.

After the game, Chigurh gives the coin to the proprietor and asks him to keep it separately because it is his lucky coin. He tells him that "[a]nything can be an instrument. […] Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting. And after that nothing is the same" (57). In my opinion, what the hitman means by "instrument" is close to Žižek's explanation of the perverse subject and "the perverse attitude of adopting the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's will" when Žižek talks about the political pervert in his *How to Read Lacan* (105). Chigurh puts himself and the coin in the same position of the symbolic system in his statement. There's no difference between human beings and objects because they are all instruments that are manufactured for specific functions and purposes and should submit to the big Other's will instead of their own ones. Chigurh's belief explains why he is such a cold-blooded killer. For him, human beings, animals and things have no difference between each other; they are all the objects that should subject themselves to the big Other. Therefore, he uses the cattle gun to slaughter people and tests his gun by shooting at birds randomly on the road. What he cares about is not the result of his behaviors, but the demand that he has to fulfill given by the big Other, which is fate in his sense.

For Chigurh, his existence can be considered as "merely an instrument of the higher Historical Necessity" (Žižek 105). That is why he says "[a]nd now it's here. And I'm here" to the shop owner. There must be some reason for the existence and meeting of him, the proprietor and the coin, and his mission is to fulfill the demand given by the big Other. Chigurh will not feel guilty at all if he kills the man just because he loses the coin-toss game. He knows that, as Žižek's interpretation, "I am able to inflict pain on others with the full awareness that I am not responsible for it, that I merely fulfill the Other's Will" (105). No wonder Woodson states in her essay that "Chigurh is a psychopath, […] he is not normally responsible, but rather he exists outside of responsibility altogether" (Woodson 7). For the

pervert who is an outsider and an outlaw, the one that really matters is the big Other's will, rather than social rules and ethics.

Therefore, from the Lacanian perspective, Chigurh should be viewed as the pervert who should not be defined and confined by the social rules; instead, he desires to create a new set of rules that is outside of the social system. Although Chigurh seems to be an outlaw who does not care about the laws and ethics of the society at all, he deeply believes in and respect the existence of the big Other beyond him. He may disavow the father's law which asks him to sacrifice his jouissance, while he needs the others to sustain the wholeness of his subjectivity. As critic Feher-Gurewich states, "perversion has a logic that organizes the psychic position of a subject in relation to the others" (192). Chigurh is outside of law, but his mission and goal is to create a new set of rules that are superior to the social system. In his article of perversion, Bruce Fink states that "in perversion the subject struggles to bring the law into being—in a word, to make the Other exist" (38). What Chigurh wants is "to discover a law, beyond the mask of the social order, that can bring solace to [his] torment" (Feher-Gurewich 192). It explains why, although being a crazy and cold-blooded villain, Chigurh creates and follows a set of rules that are different from the "normal" ones such as making decisions of whether to kill a man or not by throwing a coin and misusing the stungun of which the original function is to kill the cattle in slaughterhouse.

For the perverts, the laws of the society can be viewed as the law of the father; it symbolizes the threat of castration which limits their jouissance and, thus, forces them to create a new set of rules imagined by themselves to disavow the symbolic order. Molly Anne Rothenberg and Dennis Foster in *Perversion and the Social Relation* claim that "the pervert tries to use disavowal as a substitute for the father's 'No!' to open a space, one that will function to set limits to jouissance and allow him to emerge as a subject among subjects" (6). It seems that only through disavowing the Symbolic by creating new laws against the normal and traditional ones of society can the pervert confirm and reinforce his subjectivity. Chigurh

creates a universe of his own and, through the act of disavowing, "a perception of the 'real external world' is put out of mind" (Fink 41). He does not have to take the responsibility for what he had done because the whole system and the boundary of law are meaningless to him. It is quite obvious that Chigurh's way of disavowing reality is violence. As Feher-Gurewich states,

> the pervert can access psychic gratification only by becoming the agent of the other's fantasy (his target and/or partner), in order to expose the fundamental anxiety that such a fantasy camouflages. This no doubt explains why perverse desire produces horror, fear, and dismay in those who witness its mode of operation. (192)

The reason why the serial killer is so cruel or why he murders so many people does not matter. What is meaningful to him is the process of taking lives away and of exposing the fundamental anxiety that is unconsciously repressed by consciousness through the threat of death. It may explain why McCarthy gives such detailed descriptions of how the devil created by him murders people in the novel. When he is killing people, one of Chigurh's customs is that he used to shoot the victims in their face and especially through the forehead. For example, after killing the unfortunate driver on the interstate, Chigurh stands there and stares at the man who "slide soundlessly to the ground, a round hole in his forehead from which the blood bubbled and ran down into his eyes carrying with his slowly uncoupling world visible too see" (McCarthy 7). Through gazing at the victims, the killer is able to observe the perverse image of death, the disappearance of life and the dissolution of subjectivity. It is the fundamental anxiety of human nature that fascinates him and he is simultaneously satisfied by the sovereignty which he owns and exercises through violence. Because only through committing crimes and killing people can he transcend the sovereignty that only belongs to law and the juridical system. In short, it is the transgression of laws that helps him sustain his subjectivity.

In a way, although Chigurh is an outlaw, he is actually the one who follows the rules more strictly than Bell the law keeper. After Carla Jean tries to persuade him not to kill her since Moss is dead, the hitman tells her:

> But my word is not dead. Nothing can change that.
>
> You can change it.
>
> I dont think so. Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God.
>
> Very useful, in fact. (McCarthy 255-56)

Here again he refers to the power of the big Other and how he feels secure under His control. He can do nothing to change the words he ever stated because he has no power to make decisions, and the only one who owns the power is the big Other, so all he can do is to model himself after Him. Chigurh may transgress the laws, while he can not free himself from the sovereignty of the big Other. Therefore he has to keep his words although the addressee does not exist in the world any more.

However, unlike the proprietor of the filling station, Carla Jean is observant and critical enough to question the serial killer's beliefs. She straightly tells him: "You make it like it was the coin. But you're the one" (258). Although Chigurh always believes that he is not the one who has the power over life and death because he is just an instrument manipulated by the big Other, in Carla Jean the victim's eyes, Chigurh is actually the one who fools himself by the belief of determinism. The pervert still believes deeply that he has nothing to do with his behaviors. He tells Carla Jean: "A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning" (259). Interestingly, the notion of destiny that Chigurh convinces himself of has no difference from the one Carla Jean believes in when she was a young girl. In her meeting with Bell, Carla Jean tells him that she knew she would meet the one who was doomed to be with her when she was very young and then recollects how she met Moss in the supermarket where she worked three years ago:

> it come to me this dream or whatever it was that if I went down that he would find me. I didnt know who he was or what his name was or what he looked like. I just knew that I'd know him when I see him. […] There was not no question in my mind. Not then, not now, not ever. (132)

Ironically, according to Chigurh's belief in determinism, Clara Jean's belief in the doomed romance indirectly causes her death. She believes that Moss is the one who is destined for her, while she does not know that Moss is also the man who leads her on the way to death. Therefore, both Clara Jean's romance and death are caused by Moss who emerges in front of her eyes under the direction of fate. That is why she accepts her death after the philosophical speech given by Chigurh about doom and destiny. Chigurh further frankly tells her that "You didnt do anything. It was bad luck" (257) and that he can not release her because "[he has] only one way to live. It doesnt allow for special cases" (259). The pervert has no choice but killing Carla Jean to fulfill the contract he had made with Moss and if he makes any exception, the system of rules created by himself will thus collapse. In a way, both Moss and Carla Jean are optimists who have the fantasy and expectation for a better future. The latter falls in love with the former because she knows it was her destiny, and Moss takes the money because he believes he can survive from the hunting game. However, at the end both of their wishes are in vain. As critic Robert Jarrett states, "Moss's and Carla Jean's error is to believe in the myth of original American innocence" (69). It is the innocence that makes them optimistic, while their innocent beliefs and expectations also bring them to the path of death.

If the couple Moss and Carla Jean are the victims of the "original American innocence" that they believe in, then Bell may be the person who is still trying his best to pretend that he still believes in the innocence which used to exist in the society. As Robert Jarret says, Bell keeps "voicing nostalgia for the naïve evil of the young of the pre-World War II era prior to the triumph of commodity capitalism" while the argument of Chigurh is that "the country's providential history must be abandoned for a focus on the phenomenal significance of the

present" (69). When facing the crises that are too traumatic to be barred, both of the two characters react against them with disavowal. Chigurh seeks protection through violence, while Bell chooses to hide himself in his memories that he keeps recollecting throughout the text. Although as a policeman he keeps tracing the two outlaws, Bell doesn't seem to be involved in the crime story played by Moss and Chigurh. All he does is witness the whole story and then comment on it as a narrator who is staying outside of it.

After dealing with the event, Bell visits his uncle Ellis, a retired deputy who gives up his job after being shot by a criminal. When Bell asks him, the moment the criminal is released, if he would take a revenge on the guy or not, Ellis tells him the question is meaningless because "you never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from" (McCarthy 267). Compared to Bell, his uncle seems to be more optimistic. He does not want to know why things happen to him, but face the truth and live in the present. When Bell tries to raise the discussion on the Vietnam War, Ellis further tells him:

> You can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than what they're worth. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it. You always pay too much. Particularly for promises. There aint no much thing as a bargain promise." (267)

For Ellis, patriotism, in the psychoanalytic viewpoint, belongs to the symbolic field in which all we care about is the name of the Other and the power of the signifier. The medals are the signifiers that refer to vanished young lives that love the country for duty and ask no reward. While to the mothers who lost their sons in the war, the medals given by the government are all meaningless and empty signifiers. To the old man, the symbolic order of no matter laws or the country sustained by them does not deserve the young men to sacrifice their lives, but the irony is that "[t]his country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it" (271). People believe in father's law and name although the belief may cost them a lot. For the patriots, since human lives are doomed to vanish, what really matters is the polished signifiers they

created for themselves. While in Ellis's point of view, however beautiful they may be, they are just empty signifiers that refer to nothing.

Hearing his uncle's accusation on the symbolic order, Bell then asks him:

> Do you think God knows what's happenin?
>
> I expect he does.
>
> You think he can stop it?
>
> No. I dont. (269)

For Ellis, there is indeed a big Other whose knowledge is out of the intellectual field of human beings, but He only functions as a witness, the role which played by Bell in the novel, and will not intervene in the system although it is under His sovereignty. What really matters is not whether the big Other exists or not, but the confirmation that the big Other does exist outside the symbolic order. For both the law keeper and the outlaw, the line of the symbolic order will not be there until someone really transgresses it. It is the transgression that guaranties the order, and simultaneously subverts it.

After the discussion, Bell decides to tell Ellis the secret that has been bothering him for years. He recollects how, when he was in the Vietnam War and fighting against the enemies, he chose to abandon his comrades after they had been surrounded by them and then reluctantly received a medal because of his survival. He can not forgive himself for what he has done; therefore, he spends his whole life working for the government and society. However, he gradually realizes his impotence in a corrupted society. As a law keeper, all he can do is stay in the system of law of which the field seems to keep shrinking and decreasing. Neither can he stop the steps of death, nor is he able to prevent the others from going toward death. As Bell states near the end of the novel: "I'm bein asked to stand for somethin that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. Asked to believe in something I might not hold with the way I once did" (296). In short, he is a law keeper who has to sustain the laws that he does not believe in any more; he has to pretend that he still believes in the system for

others who believe that he is a pious believer of it. Bell may be a good sheriff who fulfills people's expectations on the social role he plays in the Symbolic, but he can never enter the Real like Chigurh who faces his will to jouissance through violence and killing.

Wandering in the external framework constructed by the elder narrator and the internal story dominated by destiny, the three male figures in *No Country for Old Men* represent different attitudes toward social order. All of them are trying to disavow reality and their traumatic perceptions given by it. One of them decides to fight against it, another chooses to sustain it although he himself does not believe in it anymore, and the other has no choice but to live on the border of it. Cormac McCarthy depicts the corruption of the law system and the pervert's intention to subvert it and disavow reality through violence. As a self-contradictory figure, Chigurh fights against the father's law while simultaneously subjecting himself to the big Other as an instrument. His behaviors may be perverse, but his intention to protect his subjectivity from the intrusion of the father's law is as pure and natural as the law keeper and the common law-abiding people. What makes him different from the others is that he follows not the ethics of the mortals, but the ones that are superior to them and created by himself. The common point that connects the three characters is that, they all believe in the existence of the big Other, but react to Him in different ways. Therefore all of them are struggle for living on the boundary of life and moral while no one gets what he wants. McCarthy depicts how the subjects react to the big Other and thus build social relations, and represents to readers a country of which the border had already been subverted and transgressed.

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