

Carter Welsh

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Bednar FYS

No Country for Old Men

It's a sunny summer day, you're driving down an old dirt road, listening to the latest radio top hits, when all of a sudden you see a broken down Toyota Prius. An unkempt man, wearing faded jeans paired with a stained wife beater, stands with his thumb outstretched, most likely in search of a ride to the closest gas station. You have two options: to either continue driving as if you saw nothing or give this stranger a ride. Most people would decline to help as the stereotype of the homicidal hitchhiker has been ingrained in our heads since we were young. However, what if it was a cop, or a brand new ferrari that had broken down instead? Would you be more likely to provide aid? The history behind the stereotypes relating to the hitchhiker and the practice of hitchhiking itself can easily be viewed through the lenses of Coen Brothers' hit thriller, *No Country for Old Men*, in which a ruthless serial killer tries to reclaim stolen drug money from a Vietnam veteran living out of a trailer. The well documented arguments that will be made will aid the reader to develop a new perspective on the way they view the hitchhikers and denizens of the road.

The history of hitchhiking is fraught with tales of injustice, misrepresentation, and the unique American desire to be free. According to "An Informal History of Hitchhiking", the advent of the hitchhiker was "a product of American automobile civilization" (Shlebecker 305). The vast amount of space that the United States occupies necessitates an easy way to maneuver through it. With the majority of the country lacking automobiles, people become reliant on the goodwill and generosity of motorists to transport them to work, college, or to the next bus

station. The appearance of these roadside vagabonds first began after the conclusion of the first world war when veterans needed transportation back to either their home or education. It was viewed as the civic duty to assist these men with a ride. It wasn't until the mid 1920's when public opinion became fearful of these hitchhikers and the harm that they could potentially cause on an unsuspecting motorist. Despite lacking direct legislation, the police tried to shut down the practice by arresting suspected hitchhikers for "obstruction of traffic" (Shlebecker 308). During this time, there was less of an emphasis on the community aspect of hitchhiking and more of a general, irrational, fear of the stranger on the side of the street. This was the second major 'phase' of the hitchhiking zeitgeist, in which, the practice would come under fire from multiple different platforms as the "the number of crimes connected with the practice [hitchhiking] continued to increase" (Shlebecker 315). It was during this time that the public became more aware of the danger that they put themselves when they decided to help that stray vagabond.

It is during this time of general distrust that *No Country For Old Men* takes place; and, the murderous hitchhiker, Anton Chigurh exhibits all the reasons for there to be a lack of trust towards strangers on the road. The opening scene depicts a cop in rural Texas arresting a lone hitchhiker, who will later be known as Anton Chigurh, the main antagonist of the film, and placing him in the back of his cruiser. Anton manages to kill his captor and escape in his patrol car, only for him to use the cruiser to pull over another motorist under the guise of a traffic infraction. Chigurh, wearing what could not be mistaken as a patrolman's uniform, demands that the unassuming motorist step out of his car as he repeats the process of murder and grand theft auto. This scene represents the blind trust we as a society place into law enforcement officers, despite not looking like a cop, Anton manages to instruct a motorist to calmly exit his vehicle and accept his death. Since law enforcement officers rank among "the most powerful

occupations in society” by commandeering the vehicle of a LEO, one is able to siphon off a part of the power that makes a regular law abiding citizen scared to resist (McCartney, Steve, and Rick Parent). Anton Chigurh further embodies the fear that traditional motorists have of the unknown during his talk with a gas station attendant. When asked if he is from Dallas (due to his stolen car’s plates) Anton responds that it's none of his business and proceeds to give the attendant the option of heads or tails, the outcome of which determines whether or not the man gets to live. This scene represents the complete anonymity that the road offers someone who takes to the road and the coin flip demonstrates the two possible outcomes for engaging with a hitchhiker: life or death. A serious decision which gives credence to why the act of hitchhiking fell to the wayside, as most people would choose not to participate in that coin flip at all if they could help it. During this phase of the hitchhikers in popular culture, “every imaginable type of nastiness, cruelty and brutality was perpetrated by hikers... on those that had been befriended” (Shlebecker 315). It doesn’t matter what type of relationship the motorist has with the hitchhiker there is always a reason to be afraid of the stranger that you let into your car as Anton has kindly pointed out to us.

Llewyn Moss, represents a different type of hiker, not one of malicious all encompassing evil as Anton portrayed, but one of practicality and social mobility. Moss is your stereotypical “trailer park white trash”, he is symbolically linked to that image of a RV with no wheels, an automobile with no mobility, no freedom (LYNLEY). When Moss finds a couple million dollars in a drug deal gone wrong, he immediately thinks of the life that he could live with the help of this unexpected stimulus package. He represents the hiker who hitches a ride in the search of economic prosperity, of a better life. As Moss sends his wife off on a bus to her mothers for protection. He, himself, gets picked up by a motorist who aids him “in spite of risks, to help the

man or woman he believes worthy” (Packer 80). Despite knowing the risks of hiking, the unnamed motorist informs Moss that a young man like him should never hitchhike as it is “dangerous” (Joel and Ethan Coen). Despite all of this Moss hikes one more time where he is ruined by an encounter with Anton Chigurh.

In conclusion, the inhabitants of the road are quite easy to be afraid of and despite the abundance of romanticization that has been attributed to them they are still likely to remain as a cultural boogymen for decades to come. It is unlikely that the hitchhikers of old will ever return to the cultural zeitgeist once again due to the simple fact that, if given the choice between even a 1% chance of being murdered by a stranger and the simple act of ignoring a stranded passerby 99% of people will take blissful ignorance. So whilst some stereotypes are misunderstood, my research shows that the fear of the unknown is probably the safer of the two options.

Work Cited.

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