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The Language of Coerced Choice in Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men: Fatalism, Agency, and the Legitimation of Violence

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ABSTRACT

In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, Anton Chigurh repeatedly asks the people he threatens to take part in explaining what is about to happen to them. This article examines how their answers enter his account of responsibility. A comparative close reading applies critical stylistics, speech-act theory and discursive legitimation to three encounters. At the gas station, Chigurh elicits a call while withholding the terms of the wager. In the hotel, he acknowledges Carson Wells's proposal to leave and denies it any practical effect. In her bedroom, Carla Jean Moss first refuses the coin toss, then calls it, and afterwards identifies Chigurh as the person responsible. The sequence of her responses distinguishes participation under threat from permission for Chigurh to act on the result. Across the three encounters, Chigurh attributes agency to others when accounting for their predicament and invokes necessity when accounting for his own conduct. McCarthy makes the limits of that explanation audible in the voices of people who have little power over what happens next. The novel thus locates a question of moral responsibility in the difference between choosing an answer and having authority over the question one must answer.

1. Introduction

A man who comes to work at a gas station can scarcely imagine that, before the day is out, a customer will ask him to call a coin toss on which his life appears to depend. What makes the episode disturbing is how little its outward form changes. Two men stand on opposite sides of a counter. One asks questions and the other answers. By the time the proprietor realises that something is at stake, the customer has taken it upon himself to decide what counts as a stake and what the proprietor must do about it. In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy (2005) makes this appropriation of an ordinary exchange central to Anton Chigurh's authority. The proprietor can affect what happens to him by choosing a side. He has had no say in the decision to put him at risk.

The pursuit of Llewelyn Moss and the money he has taken gives Chigurh practical reasons to seek information and eliminate opponents. It accounts less readily for the time he spends asking an adversary to explain his principles or a bereaved woman to acknowledge that her life could have ended in no other way. These exchanges interrupt the pace of pursuit. They also alter the question on which the suspense depends. Alongside the prospect of escape stands the possibility that a threatened person may have to hear, and perhaps repeat, an account in which their own choices appear to justify the violence about to be inflicted

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on them. Chigurh wants an answer from people he could readily silence. The precise use he makes of that answer is the subject of this article.

Determinism and moral responsibility have been concerns of criticism since the novel appeared. Woodson (2005) placed their relation at the centre of an early account of the novel's material world. Cooper (2009) approached its moral questions through folklore and the relation between Bell's storytelling and the events it frames. These approaches raise a difficulty for any reading that takes Chigurh at his word. A character may offer a coherent explanation without speaking for the novel, and Bell's inability to give a satisfactory account of violence confers no special authority on the man who professes to understand it. Mangrum (2011) sets the problem of justice within a tragic and democratic frame. O'Connor (2017) finds an ethical resource in Bell's difficulty with judgement, set against Chigurh's effort to make judgement as predictable as a law of nature. Both readings make room for a morally consequential doubt. The challenge here is to recognise what doubt sounds like when voiced by someone who cannot leave the room.

The conventions of crime fiction help explain why Chigurh's certainty can be so powerful. For Cagle (2014), games and their interrupted resolutions represent principles of narrative organisation. Pronko (2025) demonstrates the use of varying generic expectations to shape the reader's understanding of knowledge, choice and closure in McCarthy's work. In a pursuit narrative, survival gives an immediate indication of whether a decision appears to have been good or bad. Chigurh uses that expectation in his confrontation with Wells. Chigurh's practical advantage is that he can determine which man will leave the room alive. That advantage also affords him the chance to assert that the other man has been following a faulty rule. The second judgement needs an argument of its own. McCarthy allows Wells to hear the accusation and to challenge the authority behind it.

The economic language of risk offers a further reason to attend to these exchanges. Cooper (2021, pp. 100–131) relates the omission of decisive moments of choice in McCarthy's narratives of professional violence to a broader ideology of capitalist inevitability. Yamaguchi (2024) connects the violence of the drug economy with an American history of authority and reads Bell's relinquishment of a certain national self-image as an ethical decision. Johnson (2025) brings the question closer to the coin itself. In a comparison with Dreiser, he argues that financial conceptions of risk and chance can insulate an agent from accountability. In the hotel, a sum of money can be valued by both men without giving Wells the power to purchase his release. What follows from a valuation depends on who can enforce it. The exchange allows the economic account of agency to be tested at the level of a particular reply.

Two recent readings bear directly on the language of chance. Arif (2022) qualifies the emphasis on external fate by asking how inaction and failures of communication contribute to vulnerability. Cisney (2024, pp. 236–237) reads the two coin encounters together, tracing Chigurh's insistence that a sequence of prior events has brought both the coin and the person before him to the present moment. Cisney (2024, pp. 238–239) also connects the question about Wells's rule to Chigurh's understanding of his own word. What deserves closer attention is how each interlocutor answers, and which parts of that answer Chigurh is prepared to acknowledge. The proprietor survives after calling the coin and Carla Jean dies after calling it. Between them, Wells speaks at length and offers to lead Chigurh to the missing money. The three characters have very different things to say. What they share is the difficulty of making Chigurh answer for the terms on which he allows them to speak.

One question guides the analysis. When Chigurh sets the terms of a choice, what power does the threatened person have to contest them? Answering it requires attention to when an objection is made, what the next speaker does with it and what happens after the exchange. The distinction is most visible when Carla Jean calls the toss and subsequently challenges the account of responsibility attached to it. Her participation supplies Chigurh with the answer he demands, yet leaves her able to name the person who imposed the demand. Recent criticism has already identified financial language, chance and narrative form as ways of displacing responsibility. The contribution here is to distinguish three effects within represented dialogue: uncertainty about the stakes, recognition of a proposal without permission to act upon it, and compliance followed by an explicit moral objection.

2. Method and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Selection of scenes and unit of analysis

Qualitative comparative close reading is utilised in the study. Page numbers refer to the 2005 Knopf edition of McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Three scenes were chosen: in each there is an extended period of time for a threatened character to respond to Chigurh, but the knowledge available to the character and the proposals he or she can make are different. He is encountered by the proprietor in the course of a normal transaction. Wells knows him and has something to offer. Carla Jean understands his purpose and challenges his right to endanger her. The two tosses enable a comparison of one procedure under different circumstances. The hotel conversation offers an alternative scenario in which to question how much of Chigurh's authority really depends on the coin. This choice aligns with the claim concerning these longer interactions. It does not give any information about the frequency of a linguistic feature in the novel.

The unit of analysis is the exchange. Each reading follows an initiating utterance, the subsequent answer it makes relevant, the next speaker's response and the action that follows as a practical consequence. There are four questions to guide the comparison. What does the utterance ask the other person to do? What options does the threatened person see or add? What information does each of the speakers have about the risks? Whom does the explanation hold responsible for the outcome? The order of the answers in the narrative was taken into account. Specifically, the reading still provides details that make it difficult to interpret each scene in a straightforward way, such as the proprietor's survival, Chigurh's acknowledgement of Wells's proposal and Carla Jean's final statement that she understands.

The evidence is the language in the novel and the narration of what the characters do. This choice is important in a work that is well known through its adaptation. As Zurru (2010) illustrates, language and other modes complement each other to create the film's Chigurh. Locher et al. (2023) make a distinction between the communication between fictional characters and the communication by means of which an audience becomes aware of them. Here that difference gives focus to the prose between the turns, such as the way the coin is handled and how it is displayed. Actions, silences and gestures count as evidence where the narration records them. The lack of a speech tag or a description of a character's thoughts does not establish that character's private intention.

2.2. Language, legitimation, and consent

Drawing on Jeffries (2010), the study asks how words represent actions, presuppose relationships and present other possibilities. There are three features in the present reading directly relevant to the research question. The interrogative is a device that a speaker can use to seek information or to require an explanation. A modal verb can refer to a possible future, express an obligation or give permission. The grammatical subject can be changed to change the emphasis from the person doing something to the instrument used, to a previous decision or to a state of affairs. All interpretations are dependent on the context of the turns around them. Simpson's (1993) work on point of view offers an additional test when the narrator introduces an evaluative word. It is whether the narrator makes an assessment, attributes it to a character or presents it as something one character wants another to recognise that makes a difference.

Searle (1979, pp. 30–57) distinguishes between the form of a sentence and the action it may be able to perform in context. To see the difference, consider how a question about the shopkeeper's closing time can become a demand for him to account for his movements. As Culpeper (1996) demonstrates, context gives antagonistic exchanges their force, including in literary dialogue. The present analysis then asks what happens if a speaker treats a conventional courtesy as an intrusion, or if an answer generates another demand instead of bringing a transaction to an end as it normally would. Chigurh's short turns vary considerably in force. Although a command to call a coin toss and an acknowledgement of a proposal by another man can both occupy a comparable space on the page, they impose different types of obligations on the addressee.

Legitimation refers to the way that Chigurh tries to justify the use of violence. Van Leeuwen (2007) differentiates authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis as strategies of legitimation. Here, two of these resources are especially pertinent. The speaker could cite a rule or commitment as justification for action, or could present an action as the sensible outcome of a procedure. In the gas station Chigurh explains how the coin got to the counter. Chigurh tells Carla Jean that the promise he made to her husband binds him to act. Treating these manoeuvres as attempts at legitimation allows for their failure. Giving an explanation does not prove that a man in a position of power has persuaded anyone. The account of manipulation in van Dijk (2006) also draws attention to unequal access to information and control over an exchange. Claims of actual belief change would need other evidence.

Finally, performing an action is different from giving another person permission to act. Liberto (2021) discusses how certain threats can deprive an act of compliance of the communicative force of consent. Brixel (2025) discusses coercive offers from the point of view of the freedom of the person whose practical reasoning another person can direct. The two accounts address different questions. A threat could give the threatened person a good reason to make a choice without giving the threatener the right to impose it. The distinction matters for the literary analysis. A response prompted by a threat can still be credited to the individual who made it. What the act authorises depends on the circumstances, including any objections raised before or after it.

3. Analysis and Results

3.1. The gas-station proprietor and the terms of the wager

The proprietor's difficulty begins with a courtesy. Having noticed the Dallas plates on his customer's vehicle, he asks about the weather there. Ordinarily the remark would leave the customer free to answer briefly and complete his purchase. Chigurh treats it as a request for an account of where he has been. The proprietor tries to withdraw the question. When he suggests that he ought to close the shop, Chigurh starts asking about closing time and where he lives. Information about the proprietor is

now available for examination, although the customer has taken offence at a smaller curiosity about himself (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 52–56). What changes at the counter is the right to end a conversation. The proprietor has a place of business to close, yet the customer decides when he may do so.

The imperative "Call it" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 56) changes the kind of answer the proprietor must give. Until this point he has tried to supply enough information to satisfy his questioner. Now he must choose between two answers before he has been told what either of them means for him. His objection that he has staked nothing identifies an ordinary condition of a wager. Somebody must put something at risk before somebody else can fairly claim the winnings. Chigurh replies that the man has been staking his life all along without knowing it. The change of tense does much of the argumentative work. A game proposed seconds ago acquires a history extending over the proprietor's lifetime. If the stake has already been placed, the question of obtaining consent to place it need never arise.

Chigurh is quite particular about one aspect of fairness. He considers it improper to make the call on the proprietor's behalf (McCarthy, 2005, p. 56). The scruple is genuine enough as a distinction between the players' roles. Were Chigurh to toss the coin, name the face and declare the result, there would be very little left for the other man to do. Yet fairness enters the conversation only after Chigurh has reserved its most consequential decisions for himself. By insisting that the proprietor exercise the small choice entrusted to him, he can claim the credit of having respected a rule. The proprietor is still trying to discover when he agreed to play.

Another history is added to the exchange due to the coin's date. This quarter was made in 1958. According to Chigurh, the coin has spent its twenty-two years in circulation travelling to this counter (McCarthy, 2005, p. 56). All coins in circulation have such a history – almost all of it unrecoverable. What makes this coin remarkable to Chigurh is the destination he has chosen for it. Chigurh invites the proprietor to read the history backwards, as though the coin's arrival in Chigurh's hand explained why this encounter had to happen. The date indicates how long the coin has survived. It can tell the proprietor nothing about the reasons that led Chigurh to take it out of his pocket.

The man calls heads and is correct. Chigurh hands him the quarter and tells him not to put it in his pocket or he will lose it among his pocket change (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 56–57). The warning reveals an odd vulnerability of this argument based on the coin's singular past. If the proprietor does not pay special attention to it, its distinction will vanish. He is being asked to preserve afterwards the significance Chigurh assigned to it beforehand. The quarter can only keep its special position by additional human care. In this way the instruction is in line with O'Connor's (2017) interpretation of how Chigurh can make an ordinary object have exceptional value.

The proprietor survives. The good result is significant because it gives his call a practical consequence that a reading of the game as pure pretence would not allow. The scene leaves open how much he understands about the danger before he calls. It provides a much clearer answer to the question as to whose interpretation governs the occasion. When he says that he has put nothing at stake, this does not affect the conditions of the wager. When he says heads, it is accepted as his answer immediately. The problem is that each answer pertains to a different question. Chigurh welcomes a decision about the face of the coin and disregards a challenge to his authority to toss it.

3.2. Carson Wells and the practical force of possibility

Wells recognises Chigurh and has little need to ask what is at stake. Sitting on the bed in his hotel room, he suggests a future in which he abandons the pursuit and returns home. Chigurh replies, "You could" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 173). In another exchange, that reply might grant permission or encourage a man to leave. Here the shotgun lies across Chigurh's knee. The modal verb admits the possibility Wells has described, while its speaker makes no undertaking that would allow him to act on it. Wells has secured agreement on what the words can mean and no agreement at all about what he may safely do next.

Wells offers to take Chigurh to a cash machine where he can withdraw about fourteen thousand dollars. Each man could leave the encounter with something of value. Chigurh even agrees that the sum would constitute a good return. His objection is to the "wrong currency" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 173). The phrase allows him to acknowledge the price without admitting that Wells has anything with which to buy his life. Read alongside Johnson's (2025) account of financial reasoning in the novel, the exchange discloses a limit of monetary language even for the character most adept at using it. Wells can name an amount and reasonably expect his listener to recognise its value. He cannot make his listener recognise the proposed transaction.

Chigurh then offers an example from his own life. He recounts having allowed himself to be arrested in order to test whether he could escape by an act of will. He now judges the experiment vain (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 174–175). His admission complicates the portrait of a man who can entertain no doubt about himself. He is capable of reconsidering an earlier decision and of distinguishing a chosen exposure to danger from a misfortune that simply befell him. The latitude he grants himself makes the

treatment of Wells more searching. Chigurh can interpret having been caught in light of his motives at the time. Having caught Wells, he proposes to read the whole of Wells's life from the position in which he now finds him.

Chigurh asks what use the rule Wells followed can have had, given where it has brought him. The rule in question belongs to Wells. Its content is left unspecified, yet Chigurh considers himself in possession of decisive evidence about its worth. Wells is on the bed, Chigurh holds the gun and only one of them expects to leave alive. The question invites Wells to treat this difference in their prospects as a verdict on how he has lived (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 175–176). The reasoning is circular. The person who created the danger now cites that danger as independent evidence against the person exposed to it.

Wells objects that he owes Chigurh no explanation. Chigurh replies that the account would be for Wells himself. What began as an accusation can now sound like an invitation to self-examination. The shift in addressee leaves the demand intact. Chigurh is still the one requiring an account, and he has already indicated what he thinks it should show. Wells in turn asks whether Chigurh believes he would trade places with him. Chigurh answers by pointing to which of them will still be there in a few minutes (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 175–176). Wells has raised a question about what kind of life he might value. Chigurh answers a narrower one about whose life is likely to continue.

The discrepancy survives Wells's death. Chigurh shoots him, fulfilling his prediction that only one of them will remain (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 177–178). Because the prediction is fulfilled by the person who makes it, its accuracy offers little evidence for his judgement of Wells. The hotel thus supplies a comparison that the two coin scenes alone cannot provide. Even in the absence of a random event, Chigurh can make a decision he personally enforces appear to have been determined by someone else's history. Wells's proposal to go home remains the simplest measure of the difference. Both men can imagine that ending. Only one of them has the power to allow it.

3.3. Carla Jean Moss and the limits of compelled participation

After her mother's funeral, Carla Jean returns home to discover Chigurh waiting for her in her bedroom. Initially she speaks about money. She has spent what little money she had and still has bills to pay. This information could have been of importance to someone trying to collect on a debt. Chigurh already knows that she is out of money. He further says that she has done nothing to provoke him. His explanation is based on his earlier remarks to her husband. Before Moss died, Chigurh offered to spare Carla Jean if Moss handed over the cash. Chigurh now says that the promise he made to Moss on that occasion still binds him (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 184, 254–256). The switch in addressee is important. Chigurh presents the threat he made to Moss as an obligation that supposedly gives him the right to kill Moss's widow.

Carla Jean's reply challenges the appeal to fidelity. Ordinarily, a person can have a good reason to keep their word. In this instance the speaker chose the undertaking, passed the cost on to another person and claims that the death of the person to whom he spoke takes away the prospect of release. No one in the room but Chigurh regards him as bound. Carla Jean acknowledges that he gave his word and questions his claim to be powerless to do anything about it. Her objection points to an alternative open to him even now. He can renounce a pledge that he alone made and spare her. His version puts the source of the obligation in a dead man's decision. Hers returns it to the living man who has come to enforce it.

McCarthy returns to that debate on a more personal level. Here, Chigurh explains what most people tell him when they find out what he plans to do. They say it is not necessary for him to do it. He sees Carla Jean as just another member of that group and anticipates her words before she speaks. She replies that she herself has never said this to him before. Chigurh treats the repetition as making the plea predictable and therefore unnecessary. For Carla Jean, it is the person who speaks that makes all the difference. Words he has heard before can still make a claim on him now. She insists on speaking for herself, challenging his right to treat her plea as one more instance of how his other victims behave (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 256–258).

The offer of a coin toss exposes a tension in the claim that the earlier promise left Chigurh with only one course of action. A man wholly bound to kill her would have no authority to offer her a chance of survival. Yet he decides to draw a coin, displays it and insists that she call it. The narration describes the display as being for her to see "the justice of it" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 258). Kachur (2023) reads the display as an assertion of Chigurh's power to determine another person's fate. The syntax of McCarthy's phrase also identifies whose judgement is at issue. It specifies what the display is intended to let her see. It contains no report that she has seen justice in it. Simpson's (1993) distinction between perspective and narrative judgement helps explain how the prose can make Chigurh's desired interpretation available while allowing the succeeding exchange to contest it. The reader has grounds to ask who wants this action to look just.

Carla Jean initially refuses. Chigurh answers as though he could speak in advance for the person who has just spoken for herself. He predicts that she will participate, repeats the instruction and invokes her interest in preserving her life. Her religious objection receives a reply in the same register. Chigurh claims to know what God would want her to do, just as he has claimed to know what she will do. Her eventual call of heads follows these successive attempts to answer her objections for her. The

coin shows tails (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 258–259). A report confined to the last two actions would describe a person taking part in a game and losing. The sequence supplies the evidence that such a description leaves out. The option she first chose, refusing the procedure, was the one answer her questioner would not accept.

Her response after the call supplies the clearest test of whether participation amounts to consent. Chigurh points out that either face could have appeared. Carla Jean answers by identifying the person responsible for treating the result as a sentence. The short clause “It was just you” strips away the instrument and leaves the addressee in its place (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 258–259). There is no need for her to deny that the toss could have fallen differently. The coin can settle which side is uppermost. Only someone prepared to act on that result can settle what it will cost her. She speaks after naming a side and after seeing the result. Her objection is consequently evidence of what a participant can still dispute from within a procedure she has been compelled to enter.

Chigurh’s response shifts between different accounts of agency. He concedes a part to chance when describing the toss. When he describes Carla Jean’s past, he makes the course of her life intelligible as a succession of choices. When the question turns to his decision, his arrival in the room becomes as impersonal as the arrival of the coin. Cisney (2024, pp. 236–237) reads the convergence of such paths as central to Chigurh’s understanding of chance. Carla Jean’s objection identifies a point at which the histories of the man and the object diverge. Only one of them has addressed her, insisted upon an answer and offered an account of why she should accept it. The very effort he spends on explanation supplies evidence of an activity that his comparison with the coin obscures.

Carla Jean’s last acknowledgement sets limits on what the critic can know. She tells Chigurh that she understands. Her response might express understanding, resignation or partial agreement with the story she has heard. These possibilities can coexist in the circumstances. They provide little justification for assuming that she now gives him the authority that she explicitly withheld from him. Even after the toss, she continues to plead that he can still spare her. He describes her life to her as a finished story and asks her if she now understands his point. She provides the answer to that question. Chigurh expresses satisfaction with her answer and then shoots her (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 259–260). The narration brings the action back to its human subject, identifying Chigurh as the one who ends the exchange. Whatever she understands, it is his decision whether she lives or dies.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

In each of the three encounters, McCarthy distinguishes between a person’s choice within a procedure and the right to impose the procedure. The difference first emerges when the proprietor tries to find out what he has to gain or lose. Wells is aware of the risk and can offer a solution to help both men walk away alive. His knowledge gives him a bargaining position only if Chigurh is willing to recognise one. Carla Jean goes further. After providing the necessary answer, she identifies the person responsible for enforcing the outcome. The scenes, read together, distinguish three aspects of choice that an account of fate can all too easily conflate: knowing what a choice means, being able to suggest another way, and authorising what someone does in response.

These findings put the economic readings of Cooper (2021) and Johnson (2025) into conversation. Cooper finds a gap in the account of decisions under capitalism. Johnson recognises in the language of risk a means by which individuals try to distance themselves from responsibility. The effect of making an obscured decision audible again is apparent in McCarthy’s dialogue. Wells offers a sum in the hope of securing his departure. Carla Jean identifies an undertaking that its maker might revoke. Each intervention reveals a moment when Chigurh could have done something else. The fact that their interventions do not change his conduct is itself part of the evidence. It identifies who has the authority to put those proposals into effect. An objection might not persuade, but can succeed as a depiction of the situation.

The two coin encounters also qualify a reading based on the apparent impartiality of chance. The fall of the coin is as important to Chigurh as its path, as Cisney (2024) notes. He understands its arrival as the culmination of its entire history. O’Connor (2017) points out that it is Chigurh’s decision that gives this everyday object special value. This is what the proprietor’s experience brings to light: the amount of conversational work this investment takes. Chigurh assures the man that he has already staked something, tells him to call and explains how he may keep the coin thereafter. Carla Jean makes this work even harder, since she identifies who might overrule the procedure. The hotel encounter establishes the scope of the comparison. Chigurh can provide a similar retrospective justification by invoking the rule that governed another man’s life, without using a randomising device at all.

Arif (2022) highlights the importance of understanding failures of communication, thus helping to identify a further distinction. Much can be understood in the exchanges examined here. Wells is aware of the risk and Carla Jean is able to restate the pivotal question with accuracy. Their problem is that they cannot secure any standing for that understanding. Chigurh remains the final judge of what will be accepted as an answer. A call is considered participation, whereas a refusal to call is disallowed. A monetary offer can be recognised as valuable even though the proposed transaction is not accepted. This reveals an imbalance

in conversational rights and in physical power. It is in this context that the notions of coercion and consent shed light on the literary reading. Someone can opt for the most reasonable course that is still available to them without authorising the other person to restrict their choices (Brixel, 2025; Liberto, 2021).

Different tests of this interpretation are the survival of the proprietor and the injury suffered by Chigurh after killing Carla Jean. The first challenges the easy assumption that every alternative Chigurh offers is fictitious. The proprietor's call affects what happens to him. But the proprietor does not have a safe way to reject the bet. The later accident brings Chigurh himself into a situation over which he has no control (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 260–261). The accident need not suggest divine punishment. It tells us little about the fictional universe's determinism, as a determined event could still be unforeseeable by the person it harms. Yet it does place the man who claims to know the whole shape of another life among those exposed to the contingencies of this world. McCarthy allows that juxtaposition to call Chigurh's authority into question without attributing moral agency to the accident itself.

The study only considers conversations that are sustained for some time in which the threatened person is required to respond. It cannot measure the frequency of specific language features in this novel, how readers truly react to Chigurh or the significance of the pattern for violence committed without discussion. One place to begin extending the analysis is in Bell's monologues. O'Connor (2017) and Yamaguchi (2024) see moral significance in Bell's willingness to question his own authority. A study of whom he holds responsible and whom he allows to respond could connect the public discourse of his office to the private exchanges examined here. A comparison with the film would require a further explanation of how performance and editing distribute opportunities to speak.

The three encounters finally show how Chigurh asks his interlocutors to overlook his own choice in each case. An outcome could be uncertain, a debt could be genuine, and someone could understand an explanation. None of those facts gives him the right to kill. The proprietor survives because the result is favourable. That does not make the wager just. Wells's proposal illustrates the difference between 'can' and 'may'. Carla Jean's response distinguishes between understanding another person's account and granting that person authority over one's life. Her words cannot change the outcome. They do, however, change what can truthfully be said about it.

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