2014

"Breaking Boundaries" and Exploring Identity in Three Coen Brother Films

Lauren Carey
Lesley University

Lauren Carey

First Reader: Professor Liv Cummins

Second Reader: Professor Ronald Lamothe

Senior Thesis in Literary Criticism

1 December 2014

"Breaking Boundaries" and Exploring Identity in Three Coen Brother Films

Audiences were first introduced to sibling filmmaking duo Joel and Ethan Coen in 1984 with their debut film *Blood Simple.* Since then the brothers have experienced considerable commercial and critical success with their 16 films, garnering six Academy Awards wins and more than 30 nominations. Attempts at naming a definitive style or genre or subject matter is a difficult undertaking when it comes to the Coen canon, and yet it seems to be this consistent unpredictability that continues to attract critics and audiences alike. Whatever the styles or genres they are working within or the subject matter of their story, though, the brothers' interest in telling stories in America, about Americans is always clear. Ethan Coen said once, addressing this common thread, "We grew up in America, and we tell American stories in American settings within American frames of reference" (quoted in Gilmore, "*Raising Arizona*" 7). One could add, too, that they say something *about* America, and what it means to be American. In addition to grounding their films in recognizably "American" settings, *Fargo*'s blustery Mid-Western landscape for example, and topics like the 1960s folk music scene in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the Coen brothers draw upon American cultural myths in their explorations of what it means to be an American.

This interaction with American myths is a facet of most of their films, but it stands out in three particularly. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *True Grit* are three

Coen brother adaptations that, despite being forged from the material of some literary antecedent, still maintain this preoccupation with American myths. The Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a version of Homer's *The Odyssey* rendered in 1930's Mississippi. Convict Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) escapes prison with fellow chain-gangers Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) on what he tells the boys is a journey to find a buried treasure. They face a series of Odyssean obstacles before Everett informs his friends that there is no treasure, but instead he was looking to reunite with his estranged wife, Penny (Holly Hunter) before she marries another man. Set in the American South at the height of racial tensions and the Great Depression, the Coen brothers create a world around the structures of such American cultural myths as the American Dream and the myth of the white, heterosexual male hero.

Similarly, in 2007's multi-Academy Award winning *No Country for Old Men*, the myth of the male hero, this time in the context of the foundational American myth of the frontier, is one such "frame of reference" that the Coen brothers act within and react against in their adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel of the same name. When Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) finds and takes a suitcase full of cash from the scene of a drug deal gone wrong he becomes the prey of Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a hired gun who operates under his own set of nihilistic principles. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) is tasked with tracking them both down, and while doing so contemplates the nature of the changing world in which he lives. A reaction to the classic American Western, *No Country for Old Men* is then an apt vehicle through which to explore identity construction and the myth of the American frontier.

The Coen brothers' most recent adaptation, 2010's *True Grit*, becomes an interesting continuation of the conversation surrounding the frontier myth begun in *No Country for Old*

Men. An adaptation of Charles Portis's 1968 novel of the same name, *True Grit* is a seemingly more classical take on the Western genre. Told from the point-of-view the aged protagonist, the film follows Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld), U.S. Marshall Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges), and Texas Ranger LeBoeuf (Matt Damon), as they journey through Indian Territory on the hunt for Mattie's father's murderer Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin). Set in Reconstruction-era Arkansas, the Coen brothers rely on their audiences' historical and generic knowledge in order to challenge the primacy of the frontier myth in the American consciousness as a way through which one understands what it means to be American.

In contemporary America, these cultural myths are structured by boundaries and binaries, such as man versus woman and good versus evil, that dictate what it means to be American. So too in these films, the characters search for meaning and identity within the confines of these cultural myths. But, through their exploration of adaptation, historical allusion, and genre, the Coen brothers test the boundaries of these myths and present characters that often exist outside of the binaries that are meant to inform their identity as Americans. When, at the end of each film, the characters' journeys seem to lack resolution, the filmmakers expose the American cultural myths' exclusory nature. This ambiguity of the films' ends suggests that American "characters" that exist outside the boundaries of these myths are denied the ability to attain their American identity, ultimately underscoring that, perhaps, a clear identity is impossible, even dangerous, to attain.

Defining a singular American myth that the Coen brothers utilize in these three films is neither fruitful nor possible because myths are not static. Instead, to understand the mythological makeup of America is to understand the different images, archetypes, and tropes that persist throughout the different iterations of American cultural myths. Many of these tropes come from

the myth of the American frontier. The frontier myth was ingrained in the American cultural

consciousness with the closing of the actual frontier in the late 1800s, when "nostalgia" replaced

the grim "reality of the frontier,… thus opening the way for its romanticization instead"

(Spurgeon 7). Frederick Jackson Turner suggests that the mythological potential of the

"romanticization" of the history of the American frontier came from its contrast with the

European frontier, and that interactions with the frontier allowed for the development of a

distinct American consciousness (1134). If, as Richard Slotkin argues, "myths are stories, drawn

from history, that have acquired…a symbolizing function", (quoted in Blazek and Glenday 2),

then the "story" that Americans were defined on the frontier meant that the frontier became the

"symbolical" place where identity and meaning are created. This relationship between myth and

history is an important one to note, for it is through the conflation of myth *as* history that the

identity-building and meaning-making capabilities of American myths gain strength. Northrop

Frye highlights the relationship between myth and history when he asserts that "myths…are

usually in a special category of seriousness: they are believed to have 'really happened,' or to

have some exceptional significance in explaining certain features of life" (130). The

"seriousness" with which myths are considered to have basis in reality, or history, suggests their

potential tangible impact on individual and national understanding. Spurgeon similarly suggests

that "myths are what we wish history had been" and that "the moment some interpretation of

historical fact is transformed into a precedent for future action is when history itself begins to

function as myth" (3). Spurgeon makes explicit the impact mythic memory can have on

"understanding" or making meaning for the present and future, and one can understand the

creation of the frontier myth in these terms. Once the "interpretation" of the frontier as being the

place in which Americans were made distinct from Europeans became a symbol for the creation

of identity in the future, the (hi)story of the American frontier transcended into myth, thus giving it the power to effect "future action", in this case the act of defining one's identity as an American.

Tropes associated with this frontier myth include images of "wild, hostile landscape," "wild, hostile racial Others," (Spurgeon 6) and the hero on horseback who comes to tame them both. Spurgeon reiterates Beverly Stoeltje's assertion that this hero is "the male Anglo Saxon hero, [who] bravely confronts the dangerous and unknown, conquering and controlling it for the use and benefit of his people" (8). The frontier myth privileges characteristics such as individuality, tenaciousness, and perseverance in the face of adversity. It dictates that these are the qualities that one must possess to successfully "conquer and control" the unknown, and therefore create their American identity. This process, Richard Slotkin claims, is also an inherently violent one (4-6). Turner grounds this myth within specific spatial boundaries when he associates the frontier with the "Great West" and "expansion westward with its new opportunities, and its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society" (1133-1134). In all of the accounts of these tropes, it is clear that certain boundaries and binaries provide the foundation for the American frontier myth. The frontier presents dangerous, open space with unknown characters through the violent taming of which masculine, White heroes attain their American identity. The perpetuation of this notion suggests the privileging of good over evil, order over disorder, civilization over primitiveness, strength over weakness, men over women, and white men over the racial "Other". It is around these relationships that the frontier is structured within the boundaries of the "Great West". And as this frontier myth has become the basis upon which "our visions of ourselves and our identity as Americans" (Spurgeon 4) rest, these binaries also become the structures within which this American identity is formed. Even

after the closing of the western frontier, the mythic frontier continues to exist as a metaphor for the space in which people seize new opportunities with the strength and bravery of the frontier heroes and thusly achieve what it is that makes an American.

Again, though images of the frontier remain ubiquitous in contemporary America and therefore it is useful to continue to look at the frontier myth as guiding the search for identity and meaning in America, tropes similar to those that form the frontier myth are evident in other cultural myths. One such myth that is relevant to the discussion of these films and which also parallels the frontier myth is that of the American Dream. The American Dream, at its most basic, suggests that America, uniquely, provides individuals with the freedom to pursue and achieve happiness and success if they are willing to work hard to overcome adversity. This cultural myth, like that of the frontier, also has its roots in American history. Sandra Hanson and John White suggest that the myth of the American Dream dates back even earlier than that of the frontier, starting with the completion of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. They point to such historical affirmations of the reality of the American Dream as Alexis de Tocqueville's declaration that "the Americans he encountered had 'acquired or retained the sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants'" and Barack Obama's "testimony to the Dream's endurance" in his presidential inauguration speech as the "sentiments [that] give the American Dream its staying power" (Hanson and White 2-3). When historical figures give credence to the existence of the American Dream it becomes a cultural myth with the potential to impact real-world American beliefs and decisions.

Though the American Dream may have a more economic connotation than the frontier myth, the two are constructed upon parallel tropes, and as such they have overlapping boundaries. Hanson and White claim that, "at its core, the American Dream represents a state of

mind – that is an enduring optimism given to a people who might be tempted to succumb to the travails of adversity, but who, instead, repeatedly rise from the ashes to continue to build a great nation" (3). Again, Americans look to this myth and believe that their ability to face hardship and persevere is essential in achieving of their aspirations and, thusly, their identity as "American". The myth of the American Dream, then, reiterates the core values of the frontier myth. As such, one sees, again, the privileging of certain themes such as strength over weakness, good over evil, order over disorder, and freedom over confinement. These binaries exist at the core of the myth of the American Dream insofar as it is only through the maintenance of these binaries that one can indeed overcome hardship to pursue happiness and success and achieve the American Dream, which has become a defining aspect of the American identity.

These two American cultural myths provide the images, archetypes, and tropes, and perpetuate the binaries at their core that have become essential in defining American individual and national identity. As such, it is appropriate that the Coen brothers employ these myths in the worlds of their films in order to eventually challenge their inherent exclusory nature. In their consistent destruction of these binaries, the brothers create characters that exist outside the boundaries inside which "Americanness" is to be found, and the characters are subsequently denied resolution in their searches for identity and meaning. It is in this way that the filmmakers are able to expose the American mythology as exclusory and give credence to the notion that all attempts to define one's identity are fruitless.

The Coen brothers firstly break the boundaries that they feel are too rigid to allow all Americans to find their identities by setting up and working within the boundaries that they eventually will subvert. The process of breaking these boundaries and binaries is a layered and complex one. The Coen brothers continually situate their audiences within specific boundaries

before subverting them, a process that mimics the subversion of the boundaries of the American

myth for which they advocate in their films. The vehicles through which the Coen brothers make

these connections are adaptation, genre, and historical reference. Each of these provides an

additional set of boundaries on the worlds that the Coen brothers erect in their films. While the

Coen brothers suggest the absurdity of these myths and their influence on American identity

through this process of continuous subversion, they nevertheless acknowledge that the myths are

still relevant contemporary understandings of what it means to be an American. Then, to

complete their indictment of these myths the filmmakers emphasize their inherent exclusory

nature in the way in which their characters' paths towards identity creation remain ambiguous at

the end of the films.

  The predominant discourse on these three films in terms of their literary source material

most often addresses each as an individual act of adaptation. Contributions to the discussion of

Coen brother adaptations rarely consider more than one adaptation in conjunction with another,

and they are more often than not about *No Country for Old Men.* This latter notion is more

understandable than the former given the relative newness of *True Grit* and the under-

appreciation of Charles Portis in relation to Cormac McCarthy and *No Country for Old Men,* as

well as the more allusive rather than direct relationship between *O Brother, Where Art Thou* and

Homer's the *Odyssey*. The former notion, however, represents a missed opportunity within both

the academic and popular discourses on the Coen brothers. Careful analysis of the three films in

conjunction within one another suggests that adaptation has become another tool through which

the filmmaking duo advances their postmodern exploration of American identity, and eventually

the nature of identity construction within the larger experience of human existence.

The Coen brothers explicitly acknowledge their literary antecedents in each of these films. Through acknowledgement in the opening credits and shared titles, in borrowing language, characters, plot, and structure the filmmakers carefully and purposefully situate audiences in the worlds of these texts. That is, before they commence their subversion of these boundaries. Inherently, a film adaptation cannot be unwaveringly faithful to its predecessor (Stam 543). But, the Coen brothers' diversions from the literary texts, their forays outside of the textual boundaries, are meaningful in that they at once imitate the process of and provide the vehicle for the deconstruction of the boundaries of the American cultural myths that the literature, in one way or another, addresses. The process of adaptation, then, becomes one of form imitating content: the boundaries dictated by the literature, at once explicitly invoked, are eventually deconstructed, just as the binaries perpetuated by American myths, at first directly established, are deconstructed to expose the exclusivity of traditional, mythic American identity.

Historical reference and genre work in similar ways as adaptation in *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *True Grit*. Each presents another set of boundaries that helps to develop the American cultural myths that the Coens aim to expose. The brothers create worlds that are reflective of certain time periods in the American past that relate to these cultural myths, whether they are the times in which the cultural myths became entrenched in the American consciousness, or they are times in which the myths had a particularly strong impact. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* for example, references to chain gangs, railroads, the KKK, and the Great Depression create a context in which the American Dream and images of white men seeking order and prosperity after their world has been thrown into flux is particularly relevant, and thus is apt fodder for a critique of the constructiveness of these mythic images in aiding in the creation of an American identity. Similarly, the Reconstruction-era setting of *True Grit*

represents a time in the American past in which myths like that of the frontier were becoming even more deeply entrenched in the minds of Americans as being representative of what it means to be an American. Images of these historical worlds are relayed to viewers to situate them in a specific place before the Coen brothers ultimately step outside of their boundaries, subverting and questioning their role in the perpetuation of these binaries that structure the rigid formula for the realization of one's identity as an American.

Like historical references and the literary texts, genre acts as another set of boundaries through the breaking of which the Coen brothers intend to conduct and emphasize the deconstruction of American mythic boundaries. Graeme Turner, who defines genre to be a "system of codes, conventions, and visual styles which enables an audience to determine rapidly and with some complexity the kind of narrative they are viewing", asserts that "genres depend on the audience's competencies and experience: on the skills they have developed in understanding films and the body of similar experiences they can draw upon" (97-98). Turner's definitions here seem particularly apt for a discussion about the Coen brothers, who some suggest cater to a "knowledgeable audience" (McFarland 42) with their typical allusions to film history. Genre, though, despite however much it can be aptly defined as a "system of codes, conventions, and visual styles", is a fluid convention. Rick Altman claims that genres, especially today, "rapidly combine and mutate" (488), a notion with which Turner agrees and which was similarly touted in Jacques Derrida's "law of the law of genre" (quoted in Gilmore, *No Country for Old Men*" 59). This is a process that is particularly evident in the Coen brothers' work, as they regularly bend, break, and combine the typical conventions of different genres. Richard Gaughran calls this process "genre-bending" (228), a term that seems apt to adopt for the purposes of this paper. So, in order to engage in this process of genre fluidity, the Coen brothers first utilize the

"conventions" that would be thought to be typical of their chosen genres, before bending the boundaries of the genres' inherent structures. And more than being just a facet of their filmmaking style, this genre-bending often serves a specific purpose. In the context of these three adaptations, that purpose, again, is to provide a vehicle through which the Coen brothers can begin to challenge the boundaries of the American cultural myths and question the exclusivity with which they dictate what it means to be an American.

The Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* represented their first foray into literature-to-film adaptation. The pair claims that neither of them has read Homer's *The Odyssey* (Ebert "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*"), the literary counterpart to the film, which suggests the power with which myth can become engrained in the consciousness of society. Despite this admission to having never read *The Odyssey*, however, the Coen brothers alert their audiences to the connection between their film and the epic in the opening titles. In addition to the acknowledgement that the film is "Based upon Homer's *The Odyssey*", the titles also feature an epigraphic quote from the invocation of the Muse in the epic: "O Muse!/ Sing in me, and through me tell the story/ Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending.../A wanderer, harried for years on end..." (Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). The quote situates the audience in the world of *The Odyssey*, reminding them of journey of the "wanderer" Odysseus, "harried for years on end", as he returns home from his time at war. For a film that only loosely references its literary counterpart, the explicitness with which the Coen brothers invoke *The Odyssey*'s essence at the beginning of the film is essential to note. This epigraph does more than invite audiences that may be familiar with Odysseus' story to look for references they may recognize. It, rather, sets up the pattern of subversion that will continue throughout the film by

forcing the audience to become familiar with the traits that characterize the world the Coen brothers will eventually critique.

As the invocation in the epigraph at the start of the film indicates, *The Odyssey* is the tale of a hero's journey to overcome the obstacles the prevent him from returning home to his wife, who is now being pursued by a bevy of suitors after years away at war. Odysseus's story has become mythologized as the quintessential example of a (white man's) journey to overcome hardship. Its influence on the American cultural myths that promulgate the idea of perseverance in the face of hardship as a kind of measure of one's "Americanness" is evident. In the shared tropes between the two myths, the shared binaries that they reinforce become clear. Odysseus must consistently compete with "Others" throughout his journey. In perhaps the most famous scene of triumph for Odysseus, he defeats a Cyclops, who is characterized in juxtaposition to humans as being primitive in his "lawless", "unplowed" land (Homer 120-122). This difference, or "Otherness", is associated with brutishness and treated with violence, a notion that is not too far removed from the historical treatment of "Others" in American history, which have been translated into the cultural mythology through the frontier myth. Other binaries that are associated with Odysseus's journey and shared with American myths include the battle of good and evil, the privileging of strength over weakness, the assertion of men over women, and the taming of chaos in favor of order. The faithfulness with which Odysseus adheres to these binary structures informs his status as hero in the same way that persons' adherence to these binaries in America inform their identification as "Americans". As the American myths take on this Odyssean air, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* also puts on that air to address and deconstruct these myths and the binaries that structure them.

Again, an admittedly "loose" adaptation of *The Odyssey*, the relationship between the literature and the film comes from references to character, plot, and structure that were introduced in the epic. In an effort to avoid superfluous, point-by-point comparison between the book and the film, which detracts from the point of adaptation, I would suggest that it is in similarities in plot and structure that *O Brother* most importantly reflects *The Odyssey*. The Coen brothers borrow from Homer the overarching structure of a man's journey to some destination that is continuously stalled by various obstacles. Ulysses Everett McGill becomes our Odysseus and is joined by a band of followers, as Odysseus is, on a journey through Mississippi to find a fictional treasure, overcoming comically absurd obstacles like spell-casting songstresses, one-eyed Bible salesmen (John Goodman), and the KKK. Of course a certain comedy arises from the realization that McGill, unlike Odysseus, is quite literally *joined* by a band a followers through the chains that connect the convicts together. It is in diversions from the literature like this that the Coen brothers begin to shirk the boundaries that are assumed when working on a project of adaptation, and thus the boundaries of the American cultural myths associated with *The Odyssey*. That is to say, once the audience begins to understand the Homeric world they are placed in from the opening titles of the film, the Coen brothers undertake the task of subverting that understanding.

This subversion comes about primarily through the linkage of Everett's journey with absurdity. One is meant to take seriously Odysseus's tale of hardship and triumph, while Everett's journey is reduced to a blunder-filled escape from prison. Rather than undergoing harrowing tests from the gods to prove his heroism and return home, Everett's tests are often self-inflicted and always ridiculous. One scene that is particularly indicative of this phenomenon comes at the end of the film after Everett, Pete, and Delmar disrupt the KKK rally and save

Tommy, their blues-signing companion, from being lynched. The boys have narrowly escaped the violent KKK rally and, on Everett's command, sneak into a political rally for Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall). There they assume their identities as the Soggy Bottom Boys, a band that formed out of an equally ridiculous chance recording of an "old-timey" record that happened to become popular throughout the region. Their "disguises" are complete with fake beards, the strings fastening them to their faces hanging visibly behind their heads. The thought that an audience full of people would not notice, or at least would ignore, their obvious disguise is comical, but what is absurd about the scene is the way in which their music incites the audience to abandon their political candidate, Stokes, when he labels them a band of "miscegenated miscreants" (Coen *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). There are too many absurd improbabilities for the scene to be taken seriously. It is rife with what Douglas McFarland calls "comic high jinx" (43), which juxtaposes the Coen brothers' tone against that of Homer's in *The Odyssey*. This juxtaposition is emphasized by the fact that the scene refers to the incident in *The Odyssey* where Odysseus finally returns home to Ithaca and disguises himself as a beggar, testing Penelope before revealing his true identity. The Coen brothers twist the scene so that the disguises are meant to be a solution to yet another obstacle, rather than a means by which Everett can exert power over Penny as Odysseus does over Penelope. These forays outside of the boundaries of the text are only recognizable to audiences after the filmmakers have firmly situated them in the world of *The Odyssey*. The brothers' explicit acknowledgement of the text's influences on the film at its outset set up this eventual subversion of the literary boundaries. In the relationship between the Odyssean mythology and American cultural myths, the Coen brothers' subversion of these literary boundaries signals the eventual subversion of the boundaries of the American myths.

The Coens continue this process of construction and deconstruction in their treatment of historical references and genre, and their unwillingness to exist within the boundaries of these texts, histories, and genres mirrors, and thus emphasizes, Everett's inability to exist within the binaries of the American myths that these structures promulgate. The Coens' utilizations of these structures are often intertwined. One way in which they break the boundaries of *The Odyssey,* for example, is by transplanting the journey to Depression-era Mississippi, a distinctly important setting to American history. But more than just another attempt at complicating their adaptation of the epic, by introducing images and sounds of the 1930s American South the Coen brothers situate audiences within a specific historical moment, setting up another set of boundaries which they will first utilize before they challenge. Their historical references, then, become another vehicle through which the filmmakers explore their characters' attempts at identity creation.

Andrew Leiter in " That Old-Timey Music': Nostalgia and the Southern Tradition in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" suggests that the brothers make use of "various thematic staples" of the South in their film including "folk life and music, religion and salvation, hard-nosed law enforcement, demagogic politics, racism, lynching, and the Klan" (64). It is through these recognizable images of the South that the brothers set up the world that they are eventually to deconstruct. Importantly, the world whose boundaries they aim to test is inextricably linked to certain binaries inherent in many American cultural myths. Scenes like the Ku Klux Klan rally at which Tommy is marched through a massive crowd of robe-wearing Klan members to the gibbet upon which he is to be lynched evoke several of the "thematic staples" that Leiter suggests are rife in *O Brother,* like "racism, lynching, and the Klan" (64). These images that would be immediately recognizable to American audiences underscore the social and political world in which Everett and his gang live: one in which the economic devastation of the Great Depression

fueled racial tensions that remained entrenched in society after the Reconstruction era. The "thematic staples" also expose an essential binary, that of the white man versus the African American "Other", that is a product of the survival of American cultural myths that come out of the (mis)memory of American history.

Another aspect of the film that situates the Coen brothers' audiences in the Depression-era is Everett's journey to overcome all the obstacles that keep him from Penny. We return again to this aspect of the film, which was the essential structure that tied the film to Homer's *The Odyssey*, to look at the ways in which it perpetuates images of the mythical American Dream. Even during the Great Depression, belief in the achievability of the American Dream gripped the American nation and the optimism that characterized this belief (Hanson and White 4) is also evident in Everett's journey. In structure, Everett, Pete and Delmar's journey fulfills Hanson and White's definition of the American Dream, which is, again, that it is "a state of mind" of "enduring optimism given to a people who might be tempted to succumb to the travails of adversity" (3). Everett's optimism that he will reunite with Penny pushes him through all of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that he faces. As such, his journey acts as a representation of all the pursuits of the American Dream that the Great Depression spawned, thus situating audiences further in the historical context of the film. This historical situation creates another set of boundaries within which Everett must act in order to achieve success, namely unwavering optimism, the privileging of strength over weakness, and pursuit of order in a world in flux. The historical world of the film sets up these mythical binaries to which our "hero" Everett is supposed to adhere. Just as the Coen brothers deconstruct these historical boundaries though, Everett similarly steps outside of the prescribed mythic boundaries and as such is denied his American identity.

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou* the subversion of the boundaries of these historical references is mainly achieved in conjunction with the subversion of the boundaries imposed by genre. Genre categorizations for *O Brother* often include comedy, satire, parody, and pastiche. All acknowledge the inherently comical nature of the film. And, it is in this comedy that the Coen brothers seek to reengage with the mythic boundaries perpetuated by the historical references, as well as by its literary antecedent, that they first situated their audiences within in the beginning of the film.

In the film, the audience is meant to laugh when Everett gets yanked from the boxcar when his chain-gang mates are not able to catch up with the train in the opening scene. They, too, are meant to laugh when Delmar believes the Sirens have turned Pete into a frog, when the burning KKK cross comes down on the one-eyed, crooked Bible salesman (our Homerian Cyclops), and when the barely-disguised convicts pass as the Soggy Bottom Boys at Stokes's political rally. But, Douglas McFarland suggests that there is "an incongruity between comic high jinks and social commentary" (43) in the film. This contributes to the "set of comic absurdities" that the Coen brothers have developed throughout (McFarland 41), as seen, for example, in the ways that they twist Homer's literary structure and render Everett's journey absurd. The old-timey music, mismatched in its seriousness with some of the scenes that it underscores, is one way in which the Coens develop this "incongruity". Similarly, with the scenes of "high jinx" and overt comedy, when we consider the political, social, and historical context in which they arise, we are forced to ask ourselves what it is that we are laughing at. To reiterate McFarland's suggestion, there seems to be an "incongruity" (43) between the gritty, upsetting reality of the racism and economic struggles in 1930s Mississippi and these moments of nearly farcical high jinx. Images of the Ku Klux Klan, economic depression, corrupt

politicians, and vengeful lawmen have alerted the Coens' audiences to these grim realities, but the perpetuation of these images in the highly comical world of the film creates this "incongruity".

Paul Coughlin would then classify *O Brother, Where Art Thou* as "post-modern parody". In his defense against the charges of the "apolitical, empty" nature of postmodernism, Coughlin asserts that "postmodern texts often operate by adopting the styles of past representations in order to investigate them" (196). This kind of "postmodern parody" is exactly the mode through which the Coen brothers engage with the literary and historical references they initially set up for audiences. *O Brother, Where Art Thou* "adopts the style" of *The Odyssey* and the Depression-era South before using misplaced comedy not only to investigate, but to render absurd their mythic associations and the boundaries that their structures impose. The intersection of the film's comedic genre and its historical references continues the process of constructing and deconstructing boundaries that they began in their treatment of *O Brother*'s literary counterpart, *The Odyssey,* in the adaptation process. The Coen brothers have, then, proved their unwillingness to exist within the boundaries of these texts, histories, and genres. Yet, they acknowledge through their assumption that American audiences will recognize the images and tropes of the American myths they are utilizing on screen that these myths are still relevant in contemporary American society. They must then prove the absurdity of these myths' role in defining American identity by suggesting that Everett's inability to exist within these binaries explains the lack of resolution to his journey.

After revealing to Pete and Delmar that there is actually no treasure to be found, the leader of the gang reveals his true intentions in this journey, which is to return to his wife and children and reclaim his identity as the "damn paterfamilias" (Coen *O Brother, Where Art*

Thou?). It is hard to ignore that Everett's ultimate goal is one that involves the reclamation of an identity that is bound up in American cultural myths. Everett's admission that his goal is to journey through all of the hurdles it takes to return to his family as the head of the household acts as a sort of acquiescence to the identity that American cultural myths suggest are appropriate for American males. Everett must remain within the boundaries of these myths in order to achieve that end, however, and his inability to do so in the end results in the lack of resolution the film provides to Everett's journey. The Coen brothers repeatedly thrust Everett outside of these boundaries. He does not maintain his privileged position over the "Other", as represented by his blues-playing friend Tommy, nor over women, as Penny wields a power over him that inverts that binary. Similarly, he is often not successful in overcoming his obstacles by his own strength, but rather he overcomes them at the hands of some absurd luck or act of cunning. And neither is he successful in returning order to his chaotic world. Everett is ultimately punished for his personal subversion of these binaries as his pursuit for American identity is thwarted at the close of the film.

After convincing Penny to agree to take him back, she tasks Everett with procuring for her the wedding ring that she took off after the divorce. Inevitably, Everett's journey-within-a-journey involves even more absurd high jinx, including a life-saving flood that wipes out the cabin where Penny's ring is kept. The ring he returns to Penny is not her ring, however, and she refuses to accept Everett as "bona fide" without it (Coen *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). The audience leaves Everett as he, followed by his young daughters, follows Penny off-screen begging her to reconsider. Erica Rowell highlights that the end of film "bookends" the opening: "…Everett and Penny walk their children in tow tethered together like many links in a chain. This wrap-up image of the family cortege bookends the opening chain-gang shots" (246). Rowell

suggests that this parallelism points to the inherent "interconnedctedness" of our world. While this may be an accurate assumption, the significance of the scene as it relates to Everett's search for his American identity is that it suggests that Everett is no closer to achieving his goals than he was in the opening of the film. The end of this first journey is really just the beginning of another. The ambiguity of the film's ending suggests that the Coen brothers are not just aiming to question the role of American myths in the creation of one's identity as an American, but to question the process of creating an identity in general. Failing to reconcile his "Americanness" is a result of Everett's subversion of the binaries and boundaries that exist as blueprints for developing one's American identity. But, the Coen brothers' thrust Everett back into another Odyssean quest to suggest that the human journey is a continuous process of trying to answer what it means to be human, and, in the case of the Coens' films, what it means to be an American, and these are questions to which there may not be any answer.

The Coen brothers' preoccupation with the relationship between American cultural myths and American identity creation is evident also in their second literature-to-film adaptation *No Country for Old Men*. The Academy Award winner is an adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel of the same name. Both novel and film follow three men, Ed Tom Bell, Llewelyn Moss, Anton Chigurh, and their interconnected journeys through the West Texan desert in the 1980s as the drug wars were beginning to tighten their grasp around the area. *No Country for Old Men* is quite a departure, in both tone and content, from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. The "comic high jinx" that characterized the latter have been replaced by scenes of nihilism and intense violence in the former, and the characters' identity-forming journeys more complex than the borrowed-from-Homer structure allows for in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. And yet, the two films are connected, in the same way that most Coen brothers' films are connected, by their shared

preoccupation with American identity as it relates to certain American cultural myths. As adaptations, the two are more intimately tied, too, in that the filmmakers employ similar techniques in both films to assert their notions of the fallibility of the American myths in guiding the creation of one's identity as American, and the conclusion that perhaps an absolute identity is impossible and even undesirable.

The Coen brothers' approach to adapting *No Country for Old Men* was quite different than to adapting *The Odyssey* into *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. More than just capitalizing on the structure of the narrative and several important images and characters, the brothers situate themselves and their audiences much more completely in the world McCarthy has created. This difference is particularly essential in that McCarthy's novel seems to be engaging in a similar exercise in the subversion of American cultural myths that the Coens are. In "'No Way Back Forever': American Western Myth in Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*", Peter Messent tracks the ways in which Cormac McCarthy "relies on Western forms and themes, but also how he increasingly interrogates and subverts them" in the first two books of his *Border Trilogy*, *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. A similar essay with this same premise could be written about *No Country for Old Men*, a novel that McCarthy wrote more than a decade later. What this suggests is that the forays outside the borders of the Western genre, and thusly the American mythic boundaries that drive that genre, in which McCarthy begins to partake in the *Border Trilogy* revealed a certain truth about the American consciousness that merited further exploration in *No Country for Old Men*. The Coens' similar preoccupation reinforces this notion.

Messent asserts that the physical border in the novel between Mexico and Texas is reflective of the boundaries of the Western genre, and that the act of crossing the border between the two countries in the film symbolizes McCarthy's "crossing" or subverting the boundaries of

the Western genre (142). It is apt, then, in a novel that seems to revisit similar notions of subversion that McCarthy returns to this national border. The Texas-Mexico border is a particularly charged setting if one considers the suspicion of the "Other" that categorizes the frontier myth, which heavily informs the Western genre. When Llewelyn Moss, like the characters in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, crosses the border into Mexico, he subverts this binary, the maintenance of which is supposed to be a defining aspect of his American identity. Moss finds himself seeking shelter across the border after he takes $2.4 million dollars from the scene of a drug deal gone awry, an act which in itself is a subversion of the boundaries of the mythic American Dream that emphasizes that hard work and perseverance are the gateways to success in America, and finds himself the prey of the violent hit man meant to find the money. It is this series of boundary and binary subversions for which Moss is punished at the close of Cormac McCarthy's novel.

This shared intention to construct and then deconstruct the boundaries of American cultural myths between the Coen brothers and McCarthy means that when the Coens situate their audiences in the world of McCarthy's novel they lay the foundation for their own conversation about the implications of such myths on American identity. And it is the different implications presented in the two works that the Coen brothers seek to emphasize in their eventual subversion of the boundaries of the novel. Just as in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coen brothers situate their audiences in the world of the literary text before eventually subverting the McCarthy novel's boundaries. Much more subtly than in *O Brother*, though, the film's boundary-breaking comes primarily through differences in the presentation of Sheriff Bell's first-person narration. First, it is essential to examine the function of these passages of first-person narration in the novel. McCarthy's text both opens and closes with the musings of retirement-age Sherriff Ed

Tom Bell. In these passages Bell looks to explain the changes that have engulfed his county. He laments the passing of the bygone era of his and his father's generations and struggles to come to terms with the realities of the contemporary world. In an anecdote indicative of the structure and tone of these passages Bell underscores the ways in which the world has changed:

> *…some researchers came across a survey that was sent out back in the thirties to a number of schools around the country….about what was the problems with teachin in schools…And the biggest problems they could name was things like talkin in class and runnin in the hallways…Things of that nature… Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide. So I think about that. Because a lot of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I'm getting old. That it's one of the symptoms. But my feelin about that is anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot of a bigger problem than what I've got. (McCarthy 195-196)*

It is obvious from passages like these that Bell is preoccupied with the transformation of his county. Not only does this anecdote relate the new kind of violence that has engulfed Sheriff Bell's world, one in which "*rape, arson, murder"* have replaced "*talkin in class and runnin in the hallways"* as the biggest problems plaguing American high schools, but his reflection on the subject also suggests that Bell is disheartened by the new world in which he lives. John Cant asserts, "Bell, like McCarthy's other Western heroes, gets his history and his values from [the] mythology [of the Southwest]" (95). But the drugs, the violence, the "*people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses*" (McCarthy 295) are not a part of that mythology. Instead, they are indicative of a country "*in pieces*" (McCarthy 294), a country "that

has taken his region's mythology to an extreme that he…must reject" (Cant 95). "*I'm bein asked to stand for something that I dont have the same belief in it I once did*", Bell says (296). Bell's retirement is his rejection of this new path, a nostalgic parting and the acknowledgement that he "*can't do it anymore*" (296).

The function of Bell's narration, then, is to frame the action of the novel. In his musings on the changing landscape of the American Southwest, McCarthy invites the audience to try and make sense of this violence as well, asking them to reflect nostalgically on the changing times alongside Sherriff Bell. Despite his many attempts at contextualizing the violence, Bell cannot make sense of the changes, which leads to his decision to retire. Cant notes that the omission of these narrative passages from the film create a void in which the "humanity" of Sherriff Bell (96) is replaced by the "one-dimensional allegorical figure of no interest beyond his significance as a personification of all that is deathly" of Anton Chigurh, a "loss" that Cant "suggests is great" (94). If the function of these passages is to instill a sense of humanity in the story by charting the attempts at explaining the changing world, I would argue, instead, that their absence from the Coen film suggests that philosophical musings on the meaning of violence in the country as a whole is essentially not the point of the film. Rather, the film questions the prevailing American myth of the West in a different way. It focuses on the myth's implications on individual identity creation, rather than on its implications on the social and moral position of the country as a whole.

The Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* begins with voice-over narration from Tommy Lee Jones's Sherriff Bell. It is in this opening narration that the audience learns of Bell's retirement, rather than in the last passages of narration as it happens in McCarthy's novel. "The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure…You can say it's my job to fight it but I

don't know what it is anymore… More than that, I don't want to know. A man would have to put

his soul at hazard…He would have to say, okay, I'll be part of this world", Bell says as the scene

shifts. Importantly, the scene shifts to the most violent in the film, that in which our as-yet-

unnamed villain strangles, intimately and emotionlessly, the deputy that has arrested him. It is in

"this world" that Bell refuses to be part. This opening sequence, then, underscores one of the

essential differences between the McCarthy novel and the Coen film. The nostalgia with which

Bell muses on days passed throughout the novel is supplanted and replaced with this almost

singular moment of explicitly nostalgic reflection. The novel is framed by these passages of

narration that seek to contextualize and makes sense of this new kind of violence. The film rids

itself of that structure. The implications of this subversion of the boundaries erected in

McCarthy's novel are subtle but important. The Coen brothers do not focus on understanding the

violence in relation to a bygone era, they rather present it as a reality of this "new world" that

Bell is trying to reconcile. Instead, they focus on understanding what the implications of this

supplanting of the mythic traditions that once defined Bell's identity– order, civilization, strict

morality – are on his understanding of his American identity at the close of the film.

If the Coens' subversion of the boundaries of their literary source material is more subtle

than in *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, their subversion of the boundaries inherent in the film's

genre are more pronounced. But, similarly to *O Brother*, this subversion is emphasized by the

historical references that are made throughout the film. Gaughran's notion that the Coen brothers

are masters of the art of "genre-bending" (228) is important to highlight. *No Country for Old*

Men is perhaps the most exaggerated example of this phenomenon. Various academics, critics,

and the actors themselves have classified the film as many different genres including "a neo-

Western", "a classic Western" (qtd. in Vicaka 70), a "tragic western" (Gilmore, *"No Country for*

Old Men", 55), a "neo-noir" (Nelson 176), a "crime story,…,horror, [and] comedy" (Coen *No Country for Old Men* special features). Most agree, however, that it seems to defy any kind of exact categorization.

The film begins as a Western. And while other genres are coded into the film, it is the conventions of Western that the Coen brothers construct, and then deconstruct to destabilize the mythic binaries inherent in the Western form. In his analysis of the McCarthy *Border Trilogy*, Messent defines the Western: "The traditional Western depends on the construction of boundaries and the oppositions they define: those, for instance, between good and evil, known and 'other', and civilization and savagery. The 'logic' of American culture, and the 'world view and sense of history' (Slotkin 75) traditionally represented in frontier mythology, are implicit in such structures and the meanings they release" (136). Messent, here, draws relationships between the genre, American cultural myths, and the binaries that structure them both. The Western becomes then a vehicle through which these myths are further entrenched into the American consciousness, perpetuating further the detrimental hierarchical binary oppositions that are "implicit" in this mythology. Images that are indicative of the Western genre include "breath taking settings and open, hard landscapes, distinctive western clothing, guns and gun fights, horses, shoot-outs, outlaws and sheriffs" (qtd. in Vicaka 35). In an effort to situate their audiences within this genre, the Coen brothers' film opens with shots of several different, though easily recognizable, "Western" landscapes. To similar effect, two scenes in which Llewelyn Moss shops for his cowboy garb, calling for "Larry Mahan's in black, size 11" (Coen *No Country for Old Men*), his specific brand of cowboy boots, return audiences to the world of the Western after the film begins to drift outside of the boundaries of the genre. Of course, too, the brothers incorporate their own version of the iconic "shoot-out" scene, where Chirgurh and Moss

exchange fire in extreme, almost absurd, excess, leaving both wounded but still standing. When the Coen brothers reproduce these images on-screen in *No Country*, audiences familiar with the codes of the genre should understand the world that the filmmakers are constructing. They should also recognize, then, when the filmmakers challenge the boundaries of the genre in an effort to challenge the myths that are implicit in the genre's structure but also eventually result in the supplantation of the characters' American identities with resolution-less ambiguity at the close of the film.

More than just subverting the conventions of one genre, though, the Coen brothers mix genres. The other genre most often associated with *No Country for Old Men*, and the Coen canon in general, is neo-noir. In his introduction to *Philosophy of Neo Noir*, Mark Conard lists some themes that generally categorize neo-noir including "inversion of typical values," "moral ambivalence," "alienation, paranoia, and pessimism," "crime and violence," "attempts to disorient the spectator" (1). Many of these characteristics seem to contradict the tenets of the Western, particularly the emphasis on the moral ambiguity of its characters and the "inversion of typical values". In a genre that generally perpetuates the good versus evil binary, asserting the triumph of good over evil, the Western does not seem to mix well with the neo-noir. This seeming contradiction, however, fits nicely with the Coen agenda in the film.

As the Coen's set up the Western tone of the film only to subvert it with the insertion of these contradictory noir themes, they too set up the classical American mythology that the Western perpetuates to eventually subvert it, instead questioning the restrictive nature of the boundaries of these myths in informing one's American identity. Most significantly, the Coens replace the good versus evil binary of the classic Western with the moral ambiguity of the neo-noir. Consider, for example, our three main characters. Sheriff Bell is supposed to represent the

archetypal "good guy", and Anton Chigurh is meant to fit the role of the "bad guy". But, there is

another lead character in the film, Llewelyn, who is a kind of "in-between guy", one who does

not have generally malevolent intentions, but who does not always operate within the moral and

legal boundaries of his society. Looking more closely at our other characters, too, the distinct

lines that separate the "good" from the "bad" are also blurred. Bell's "goodness", or at least his

status as Western hero, is called into question when the audience is made aware of his retirement,

which is, in his eyes and perhaps others, an act of giving in to the evil that has engulfed his

county. Similarly, though his actions are reprehensible, Chigurh's evilness is questioned. As

Richard Gaughran aptly suggests "many of the absurd characters are entertaining and likeable,

and even some of Coens' nihilistic destroyers are attractive for their defiant energy" (239). This

description applies to Chigurh; there is an attractive quality about him, particularly when

considered in relation to Sheriff Bell's laconic, often rambling sensibilities.

These forces of subversion, in both the genre conventions and the binaries of the

American myths, are at work in one of the most iconic scenes in the film. Here, Chigurh has a

perplexing conversation with the proprietor of a gas station:

PROPRIETOR: I seen you was from Dallas.

CHIGURH: What business is it of yours where I'm from, friendo.

PROPRIETOR: I didn't mean nothin' by it.

CHIGURH: Didn't mean nothin'…

PROPRIETOR: Is somethin' wrong?

CHIGURH: With what?

PROPRIETOR: With anything?

CHIGURH: Is that what you are asking me? Is there something wrong with anything?...

CHIGURH: …what time do you go to bed?

PROPRIETOR: Sir?

CHIGURH: You're a bit deaf, aren't you? I said what time to do you go to bed? (Coen

No Country for Old Men)

Not a traditionally "funny" moment, in fact the scene is quite tense as the audience waits to see

whether the proprietor will become Chigurh's next victim, there is an air of comedy here. But

this comedy is presented in a way similarly to *O Brother, Where Art Thou* in that the "nervous

laughter" (Fuller 19) the scene elicits seems incongruous with the grim realities of the film's

world. For one, the question-and-answer banter that fills the rather lengthy scene imitates the

tone of the absurd that has been introduced in the film previously. At the same time though, there

is a quality in Bardem's performance, his detached, matter-of-fact delivery, which radiates the

kind of dark comedy that Thomas Hibbs associates with many examples of film noir. Hibbs also

comments that in these "absurdly comic" noirs "what initially seems serious and ominous can,

over time come to seem humorous. Angst and fear can be sustained for only so long; endless and

pointless terror becomes predictable and laughable…Life in an absurd universe is rife with

comic possibilities." (28). Here Hibbs is commenting on the general nature of nihilistic comedy,

but his description seems to define exactly the sense this scene in *No Country for Old Men*

conveys. The tropes of neo-noir and dark comedy that the Coen brothers code into the film in

scenes like this one move the film outside of the boundaries of the classic Western, and they

ultimately pose a sense of absurdity onto this world that aims to define people based on their

maintenance of such boundaries.

While the Coen brothers suggest the absurdity of these myths and their influence on

American identity, they nevertheless acknowledge that they still have a hold on contemporary

American audiences. The ambiguous endings to the characters' journeys, then, serve to further this indictment of the cultural myths. Again, the Coens' characters in *No Country for Old Men* exist outside of the mythic binaries that are said to inform American identity: each one presents a challenge to the conventional good versus evil binary; Bell's retirement signals his inability to maintain order in this evermore increasingly disordered world; and Chigurh's racial ambiguity represents a challenge to the man versus "Other" paradigm. Bell and Moss are punished for their inability to maintain these binaries as evident in the resolution-less ending to their stories. Moss, who straddled the lines between good and evil, and both literally and symbolically crosses the border into the land of the "Other" throughout his journey, is denied the chance to ever develop his American identity because the drug gang kills him before he has the chance. The portrayal of his murder emphasizes this lack of resolution in that the act happens off-screen and audiences never see his dead body. In a film that is rather explicit in its depiction of violence, the restraint shown in depicting Moss's death is a deliberate exercise in conveying ambiguity. Bell's story also ends ambiguously as he recounts dreams he had of his father to his wife. In this dream world, he contemplates life and death and the past and the present in a way that is indicative of his continued efforts to make sense of himself in a world that he increasingly does not understand. Both his retreat to a dream world, and the end to his preoccupation with reconciling his identity reflect the ambiguous position Bell is relegated to due to his inability, as a Sheriff, to tame the chaos and violence of the new world.

The only character whose identity does not seem in flux at the end of the film is Anton Chigurh. Though his story ends after he escapes the car wreck that leaves him limping off into the distance, and the audience is left questioning whether or not he killed Carla Jean, or if he returned the money he retrieved to those who hired him, this ambiguity does not effect his

identity the way it does with Moss and Bell. Chigurh's storyline does not hinge on his ability to forge one's American identity in the way that the other men's do. Rather, Chigurh is secure in his identity, living strictly according to his own "principles", such as an uncompromising loyalty to the nature of chance and the refusal to submit to vulnerability, a truth which is established in his penchant for hinging people's lives on the flip of a coin. Throughout the film, Chigurh is an entity rather than a person, a figure of evil and death, rather than a complex character. What this suggests, then, is that to be completely secure in one's identity is not human. And even more than that, it shows the potentially dangerous nature of confining this complex world to such a rigid set of beliefs. Chirugh defines his world and his identity by a series of "absolute truths", the rejection of which Paul Coughlin asserts is one of the primary characteristics of postmodern texts, of which the Coen brothers' films are apt examples (196-197). The steadfastness with which he abides by these truths is portrayed to be a facet of his inhuman nature, and as such reflects the notion that any endeavor to make sense of the inherent complexity of the world, especially in the pursuit of a singularly defined identity, can have a dangerous impact on human experience. The Coen brothers, then, in underscoring the ambiguous endings for their two "human" characters, Moss and Bell, in their journeys to claim their American identities suggest the exclusory nature of the predominant American cultural myths that guide identity creation. But even more than that, the equation of the inhuman Chigurh with security with one's identity, suggests that the need to define one's identity, which is acknowledged to be an essential component of the human condition, is instead one that not only goes unfulfilled for most, but when fulfilled can have dangerous consequences.

The Coen brothers' 2010 film *True Grit* is agreed by most to represent a distinct departure from the rest of the Coen canon, but careful consideration reveals that similar forces of

subversion and questioning are at play as those evident in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *No Country for Old Men*. In her discussion of the film in relation to other Coen "Westerns" Susan Kollin calls *True Grit* the "most un-Coen-esque of all the Coen brothers' films" (321). Similarly, Roger Ebert calls it out as being not a "Coen brothers film is the sense that we usually use those words" (6), and another reviewer notes that it "*seems* a straightforward and unlikely foray into the Western genre by two filmmakers better known for darker, more comedic flicks…" (emphasis added, Felman 1). What makes *True Grit* appear to be a departure from other Coen films is that it lacks the explicit absurdity, the in-your-face irony, the eccentricity that one is never quite sure what to make of that some of their earlier, more characteristically "Coen" films possess. Similarly, as evidenced in Roger Ebert's claims that this film is the "first straight genre exercise of their career", and that it is simply "a splendid Western" (5-6), on the surface the brothers seem not to be participating in their usual "genre-bending" (Gaughran 228) ways. It would follow, then, that *True Grit* must represent an acceptance of the Western mythology on the part of the Coens. When viewed more than once, however, *True Grit*, though admittedly more reservedly or at least subtly, engages in the same kind of antagonism with the popular mythology that the Western exemplifies. Richard Gilmore comments when discussing *No Country for Old Men* that one "frequently has the sense after watching a Coen brothers movie that there was more going on than one quite got" ("*No Country for Old Men*", 58). This applies just as earnestly to *True Grit* as it does to *No Country*. On the surface, *True Grit* is a reimagining of the Western that finally earned John Wayne an Academy Award in the first adaptation of the film in 1969. When viewed more deeply (and at least more than once), it becomes clear that the film participates in the reinvention of the American "history" that is created and perpetuated through the American myth, a myth to which the Western in inextricably tied.

The first way in which *True Grit* works to reinvent this mythology is through the subversion of the boundaries of Charles Portis's 1968 novel, and Henry Hathaway's 1969 film adaptation. Hathaway's earlier film adapts Portis's novel in a way that exposes his own beliefs as they relate to American cultural myths. In this way, the added material with which the Coen brothers have to work in their own adaptation contributes to an even more complex dialogue between the Coens' film and their source material. Like McCarthy does in *No Country for Old Men*, Portis engages with American myths in a way that shows that he, too, questions their function in guiding one's identity as an American.

The action of *True Grit* takes place in Reconstruction-era Arkansas, a time that found the South reeling from the loss of the Civil War, and the time in which the myth of the frontier became particularly entrenched in the American consciousness. The implications of this historical setting in understanding Portis's ruminations on American myths are essential. It signals to the readers that they should be on the look out for the certain binaries that have come to define the frontier myth. Similarly, the basic plot, a revenge plot that takes place in the untamed "Indian Territory", which the audience hears from older Mattie Ross's first person narration, should signal to a knowledgeable audience that they are reading a Western.

Henry Hathaway certainly understood the signals that labeled *True Grit* a Western, and as such adapted the novel into a classic Western film, with legend John Wayne at its helm as Rooster Cogburn. Hathaway's film ventures outside of the boundaries of Portis's novel, however, in that he nearly erased Mattie's voice from the film. Portis's novel is Mattie Ross's story. The reader gets her account of the events of her journey with Rooster and hears her mature voice at the beginning and the end of the novel, which provides context and narration. In eliminating this narration, Hathaway strips Mattie of the agency to tell her own story that Portis's

novel relied on. Interestingly, this important subversion of the novel's boundaries serves to

reinforce the binaries of the frontier myth. *True Grit*, the novel, in its nearly classical treatment

of the Western genre seems to reinforce all of the significant binaries that inform the frontier

myth. Mattie and Cogburn prevail, despite hardship, in carrying out revenge for her father's

death. In addition, order is restored in the primitive world of the "Indian Territory" when the

group kills the evil Cheney. The fact that all of these binaries remain in tact at the close of

Portis's novel serves to emphasize that the man versus woman binary is deconstructed. In

centering his otherwise classic Western on the precocious Mattie, Portis inverts this binary.

Hathaway rids his *True Grit* of this incongruence, ultimately reinforcing the primacy of the

frontier myth in guiding what it meant to be an American. Judith Fletcher points out that the

different representations of the climax of the story in the novel and the film best reflect this

discrepancy. She notes that in the Portis novel Mattie Ross wounds Tom Chaney on her own,

which slows him down before Rooster can finish him off. In the Hathaway film, however, the

power to kill the enemy is placed firmly in the male protagonists hands, as it is Wayne's

"Rooster alone that commits the deed" (Fletcher 241). In removing the power, both to speak for

herself and complete the revenge cycle for which she undertook this journey, from Mattie Ross's

hands, Hathaway reasserts the primacy of the mythology that is perpetuated in the Western

canon that glorifies male dominance. It is clear from his portrayal of the precocious, but

competent Mattie Ross, who fits into the male-centered world of the Old West, that Portis

attempted to reengage with this prevailing mythology in the same way that we see the Coen

brothers. Like the Coen brothers, in *True Grit* and their other films, Portis breaks the boundaries

of the predominant cultural myths in order to question their validity in defining American

identity.

Yet, what Portis begins to do in *True Grit* in his reinterpretation of the male-dominated mythology that is exemplified in the Western of Hathaway's mind, the Coen brothers take one step further. Fletcher again points to a subtle but important difference in the portrayal of the climactic scene of the novel/film arguing that "the Coens change the ending of the story in a way that makes Mattie solely responsible for the death of Tom Chaney, the man whom she sought to bring justice for murdering her father" (241). Mattie's agency is restored, even emphasized, in the Coen brothers' film. This twist on Portis's climax represents a breaking of the literary boundaries that the Coen brothers had previously situated audiences within. As Portis's novel and Hathaway's film perpetuate, to a certain extent, the man versus woman binary, the Coen brothers' twist, then, also serves to subvert the perpetuation of male dominance (over women, over evil, over nature) that structures the American mythology.

The Coen brothers also challenge the boundaries of Portis's novel and the Western genre in the way that they present violence in the film. It may seem odd to study the violence of *True Grit* when one considers that the Coen brothers have also made films like *Fargo* and *No Country for Old Men* that are steeped in an eerie and (in the case of *No Country*, in particular) unwavering violence. But, Susan Kollin suggests that *True Grit* audiences are meant to question "the costs of this violence and retribution" that has caused the "bodies to pile up" throughout the film (321). Kollin posits that music borrowed from the film *The Night of the Hunter*, a classically noir, "creepy" film that opens and closes *True Grit* is the signal that is meant to force a "disturbing and unsettling feeling" in the audience, making them think twice about the meaning of the film's violence. While the parallel that Kollin draws between *True Grit* and *The Night of the Hunter* is interesting, particularly given previous discussions of the Coen's utilization of noir conventions in their films, a more appropriate example of the Coen brothers instilling a need to

question the film's violence in their audiences is with their addition of the hanging Native

American scene. In the scene, which is not in Portis's novel, Mattie and Rooster come across a

body hanging from a tree limb as they make their way through the Indian Territory in search of

Chaney. Graham Fuller is correct is assessing this scene as a descent into "strangeness" (19).

Fuller acknowledges that there is no explanation given for this man, "who he is or why he was

hanged", and that he his is met with an "unfazed" matter-of-factness of Cogburn, whose reaction

suggests a comfort with this kind of violence. Much like the "incongruous" laughter in *O Brother*

(McFarland 47) and the "absurd" laughter in *No Country* (Hibbs 28), the violence in *True Grit*

that is met with this "unfazed" acceptance "provokes nervous laughter" in audiences (Fuller 19).

Though seemingly operating within the boundaries of the Western genre, of which violence is an

essential part, the Coen brothers actually challenge these boundaries by rendering the violence

absurd through the "nervous laughter" the scene elicits.

In addition to the deconstruction of the boundaries of Portis's novel, another way in

which *True Grit* works to subvert and reimagine these symbols of the West, and ultimately the

mythologies that inform American identity, is in its explicit examination of the Western genre.

The Coen brothers, as they do in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *No Country for Old Men*,

situate their audiences in the world of the Western through the images of the old Western town

that opens the action of the film, and through mature Mattie Ross's introduction of the revenge

plot in her opening narration. But from the outset of the film, competing sets of images seem to

signal that other generic conventions are also at work. The emphasis on the moving train that

carries Mattie to Fort Smith signals the start of her personal journey. And while this journey

happens within the context of the revenge plot against Cheney, the Coen brothers supplant the

traditions of the classic Western (most particularly its perpetuation of male dominance) with

traditions more akin to the bildungsroman. Again, Mattie's narration is essential in understanding these generic differences. The transition from youth to adulthood that defines a bildungsroman is exemplified in the space between the time of the film's action and the time of Mattie's present-day world where the audience gets to hear this narration. Young Mattie's precociousness eventually, and seemingly as a result of her time in the Indian Territory with Rooster, gives way to older Mattie's mature, reserved reflectiveness. The Coen brothers lay these two genres on top of one another in the film, revealing a fluidity in generic boundaries that destabilizes the rigid mythic binaries that the Western typically reinforces. In the coming-of-age story structure of their *True Grit*, which the Coen brothers utilize in addition to the structure of a Western, Mattie Ross defies the patriarchal, hyper-masculine constructs of the cultural myths at the heart of the Western genre. This subversion of the masculine structures of the Western through the addition of the structures of the bildungsroman is another way in which the Coen brothers challenge the American myths that aim to define American identity.

In keeping with the patterns established in the other two adaptations, Mattie Ross is never able to reconcile her identity as an American. The language of her concluding narration highlights the ambiguity of her story's end:

> No doubt people talk about that. They say, "Well, she hardly knew the man, isn't she a cranky old maid." It is true I have not married; I never had time to fool with it. I heard nothing more of the Texas officer LeBoeuf. If he is yet alive, I would be pleased to hear from him. I judge he would be in his seventies now, and nearer to eighty than seventy. I expect some of the starch has gone out of the cowlick. Time just gets away from us.

Mattie speculates about where LeBoeuf ends up after their adventure together the same way the audience is forced to speculate about where Mattie Ross eventually ends up. Few things about

her life after killing Cheney are certain, other than the fact that she is an outsider. Mattie refuses to conform to the standards of her society, standards of what an American woman should look and act like that are informed by cultural myths, and as such she is forced to remain on the periphery of American life. She is branded an "old maid" for her inability to assume the traditional identity for American women. On one hand, the matter-of-fact suggestion that "time just gets away from us" in conjunction with the questions the audience is left with about Mattie's mature life highlight the notion put forward in other Coen brother films that the cultivation of any true and absolute identity is impossible within the confines of time. When considered in relation to the other films too, however, "time just getting away from us" can be considered the "danger" the preoccupation with one's identity presents, as established in *No Country for Old Men*. Young Mattie's obsession with enacting revenge as a means of forming her identity and making sense of a world thrown into flux with the death of her father and older Mattie's nostalgic retelling of this event becomes a detriment to her. Her quest for such an identity has left her in a state of perpetual ambiguity, as time continues to "get away from her".

To return again to a comment made by Richard Gilmore addressed previously, in all of their films the Coen brothers' tell stories and create worlds for the audiences with such complexity there seems to always be more one wishes to understand. Gilmore's full reflection is this:

> …one frequently has the sense after watching a Coen brothers movie that there was more going on than one quite got. The more I see in *No Country for Old Men*, the more I am convinced that there is much more that I am not seeing. This is a very important realization to have in order to begin to really get what is going on in a Coen brothers film.

In this sense, their films are like the world: there is always more to understand; there is

always more to get. ("*No Country for Old Men*", 58).

Gilmore's comments here aptly point to the complexity of all of the movies in the Coen canon,

and allude to the kind of reputation as "boundary breakers" that I have set out to track in these

three adaptations. Perhaps audiences are instilled with the feeling that they are "missing

something" when they first watch a film by the Coen brothers because the brothers engage in a

process of constructing and deconstructing worlds that often ends ambiguously. In *O Brother,*

Where Art Thou?, the Coen brothers deconstruct the world of Homer's *The Odyssey*, the world

of 1930's Mississippi, and the conventions of comedy in an effort to reveal the shortcomings of

the American Dream, utilizing the cyclical nature of Everett's journey at the end of the film to

emphasize the elusive nature of identity. Employing similar techniques, the Coen brothers work

to deconstruct the worlds of the Western and Cormac McCarthy's novel in *No Country for Old*

Men. In a more nuanced engagement with their literary source material and generic and historical

conventions, in this film the Coen brothers destabilize the primacy of the frontier myth in

guiding American identity. And more than that, too, in the juxtaposition of Anton Chigurh's

secure identity and Moss's and Bell's ambiguous identities, the films builds upon the notion that

a singular identity may be impossible to define, which is suggested in the cyclical nature of

Everret McGill's journey, arguing additionally that defining a rigid identity may also be a

detrimental endeavor despite it having become a defining aspect of the human experience.

Ultimately, *True Grit* expands once again on this reflection on the nature of identity. After

permeating the boundaries of both Charles Portis's and Henry Hathaway's *True Grit* as well as

the conventions of the classic Western, the Coen brothers suggest that perhaps the danger in

being preoccupied with a fixed identity is in allowing time to "just get away from us" (Coen

True Grit). That is to say that the Coen brothers' destabilize the worlds that they create, and leave audiences without any sort of resolution or re-stabilization in each of these three films in order to say there are more important facets of the human experience than the preoccupation with creating a rigid identity in an inherently non-rigid world. This inspires discomfort on the part of the audiences who recognize in Coen worlds and characters their own world, and perhaps, themselves, and who have been conditioned by such cultural myths as the American Dream and the myth of the frontier to seek and define such structure and identity.

And so, while the Coen brothers and others admit that there is something quintessentially "American" about their films, their films also more broadly comment on the nature of human existence. American mythology, the interaction with which emphasizes this "American" character of Coen brother films, represents an attempt to make sense of our history and guide our present and future in order to alleviate the discomfort that may come along with acknowledging that this world cannot be understood in absolute truths. These myths aim to create rigid structure around a world in constant flux, and the films' subversion of these myths serves to restate the world's fluidity. In this complex world, the Coen brothers suggest, to be preoccupied with erecting boundaries in an effort to make sense of the world is dangerous in that it allows time to drift fleetingly away; time that could be better spent existing within the discomforting complexity of the world in order to examine its origins. Though not explicitly, the Coen brothers posit that rejecting one's preoccupation with identity formation in favor of acknowledging the uncomfortable complexity of the world may allow one more time examine the forces, arguably often perpetuated by cultural myths, that have given rise to such discomfort. For example, Sheriff Bell's unsuccessful quest to reassert identity in the changing world of the 1980's American Southwest distracts him from understanding the causes behind "the crime you see

now" (Coen *No Country for Old Men*) like the drug wars and the excessive violence. Bell admits that he refuses to exist in a world that invokes such discomfort saying, "I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand. You can say it's my job to fight it but I don't know what it is anymore...More than that, I don't want to know. A man would have to put his soul at hazard" (Coen *No Country for Old Men*). Bell's reluctance to put his "soul at hazard" is evidence of his reluctance to exist within the discomfort the contemporary world has provoked in him. He would rather work to reassert his American identity, as he does, albeit unsuccessfully, throughout the film, in an attempt to reassert boundaries in an increasingly more complex world. Bell, then, and the audience in turn, are left unsettled by the seeming meaninglessness of the violence of "this world", rather than understanding of the forces that created a world in which such violence exists. The same phenomenon arises in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *True Grit*. Both Everett and Mattie miss opportunities to make sense of the ways of the world, and in particular its injustices towards women and racial minorities, outside of themselves due to their preoccupation with their own identities and individual journeys.

In the end, the Coen brothers break boundaries, not for the sake of doing so, but rather to break down the structures that impede one's existence within the inherent flux of the world. The characters in these three films spend so much time erecting such boundaries in the form of a coherent, often culturally acceptable, identity that they deny themselves the full experience of the discomfort that comes from the world's complexity. In turn, they lack the ability to identify and address the forces that instigate such discomfort, forces including, to name a few, the perpetuation of patriarchal paradigms and the racial and class-based inequality that arises from the reliance on American cultural myths. The Coen brothers, then, suggest to their audiences that human existence should not be bound up in the process of erecting boundaries to shield

individuals from the discomfort of knowing that "there is always more to get" (Gilmore "*No Country for Old Men*", 58) in the world. Rather, more important to the human journey is the process of shedding boundaries in order to experience, understand, and address the complexity of the world that exists outside of one's own self.

Works Cited

Altman, Rick. "A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre." In *Critical Visions in Film*

    Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings. Eds. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White,

    and Meta Mazaj. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011. Print.

Blazek, William and Michael Glenday. "Introduction." *American Mythologies: Essays on*

    Contemporary Literature. Eds. William Blazek and Michael Glenday. Liverpool:

    Liverpool University Press, 2005. 1-14 E-Book.

Cant, John. "The Silent Sheriff: No Country for Old Men - A Comparison of Novel and Film."

    Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and

    Crossings. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

Conard, Mark T. "Introduction." *The Philosophy of Neo-noir*. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky,

    2007. Print.

Coughlin, Paul. "The Past is Now: History and *The Hudsucker Proxy*". *Philosophy of the*

    Coen Brothers. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

    195-210. Print.

Ebert, Roger. "O Brother, Where Art Thou?." Rev. of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*.

    RogerEbert.com. Ebert Digital, LLC., 29 Dec. 2000. Web.

Ebert, Roger. "True Grit." Rev. of *True Grit*. *RogerEbert.com*. Ebert Digital, LLC. 21 Dec.

    2010. Web.

Felman, Dedi. "True Grit: Rewriting the Western." *Literary Kicks*. N.p., 24 Feb. 2011. Web. 01

    Nov. 2014.

Fletcher, Judith. "The Catabasis of Mattie Ross in the Coens' True Grit." *Classical World* 107.2

    (2014): 237-54. *Project Muse*. Web.

Frye, Northrop. "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement." *Theories of Myth: From Ancient Israel and Greece to Freud, Jung, Campbell and Levi-Strauss.* Ed. Robert A. Segal. Vol. 4. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. 119-139. Print.

Fuller, Graham. "No Country for Young Girls". *Sight and Sound 21.2*. (2011). 16-19. 25 Aug. 2014.

Gaughran, Richard. "What Kind of Man Are You: The Coen Brothers and Existentialist Role Playing." *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers.* Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 227-241. Print.

Gilmore, Richard. "*No Country for Old Men:* The Coens' Tragic Western." *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers.* Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 55-78. E-Book.

Gilmore, Richard. "*Raising Arizona* as an American Comedy." *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers.* Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 7-25. E-Book.

Hanson, Sandra, and White, John. "The Making and Persistence of the American Dream." *American Dream in the 21st Century*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Temple University Press, 2011. ProQuest ebrary. E-Book.

Hibbs, Thomas. "The Human Comedy Perpetuates Itself: Nihilism and Comedy in Coen Neo-Noir". *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers.* Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 27- 40. Print.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Classics, 1996. Print

Kollin, Susan, et. al. "From *Blood Simple* to *True Grit*: A Conversation about the Coen Brothers' Cinematic West." *Western American Literature, 48.3*. (2013): 312-340. *Project Muse*.

Web. DOI: 10.1353/wal.2013.0059.

Leiter, Andrew B. "'That Old-Timey Music': Nostalgia and the Southern Tradition in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals Since the 1970s*. Ed. Andrew B. Leiter. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011. 74 E-Book.

Messent, Peter. "'No Way Back Forever': American Western Myth in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy." *American Mythologies: Essays on Contemporary Literature*. Eds. William Blazek and Michael Glenday. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005. 128-157. E-Book.

McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men.* New York: Random House Inc., 2006. Print.

McFarland, Douglas. "Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" *Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 41-54. Print.

Nelson, John S. *Popular Cinema as Political Theory: Idealism and Realism in Epics, Noirs, and Satires*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. E-Book.

No Country for Old Men. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Miramax Films and Paramount Vantage, 2007. Film.

O Brother, Where Art Thou?. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Buena Vista Pictures, 2000. Film

Portis, Charles. *True Grit.* New York: Overlook Press, 1968. Print.

Rowell, Erica. "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*: A Song." In. *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007. E-Book.

Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973. Print.

Spurgeon, Sara L. "Introduction." *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern*

Frontier. College Station, TX, USA: Texas A&M University Press, 2005. ProQuest

ebrary. E-Book.

Stam, Robert. "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogic of Adaptation." *Critical Visions in Film Theory*.

Eds. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, Meta Mazaj. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins. 541-

557. Print.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. "*From* The Significance of the Frontier in American History". *The*

Norton Anthology of American Literature. Ed. Nina Baym and Robert Levine. New

York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 1133-1137. Print.

Turner, Graeme. *Film As Social Practice*. London, GBR: Routledge, 1999. ProQuest ebrary. E-

Book.

True Grit. Dir. Henry Hathaway. Paramount Pictures, 1969. Film.

True Grit. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Paramount Pictures, 2010. Film.

Vicaka, Inese. McCarthy and the Coens: The Novel versus the Film No Country for Old Men:

The Moral Framework of the Novel and the Film. Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2014.

Ebook Library. Web.