Lack of Authority in Cormac McCarthy’s No Country For Old Men

The novel No Country For Old Men takes place in the desert area near the Texas-Mexico border. It is a time of destruction between gangs and civilians when some money comes up missing. The readers are introduced to Llewelyn Moss, he is the main protagonist of the story who finds two million dollars after walking into the aftermath of a massacre, and Anton Chigurh who is a cold-blooded killer in search of that money, killing any person who stands in his way. McCarthy uses the setting of the novel, the characters, and the events, whether good or bad, to convey one overall purpose in the book. Throughout the novel, it is seen that there are many violent acts and crimes that take place, but one question always comes back into the reader’s mind - Where are the police? Cormac McCarthy uses authority, or the lack of authority, in No Country For Old Men in order to show the deterioration of society during this time.

McCarthy uses the desert setting to show the emptiness of the people and the society. By definition, a desert is a dry, hot, sandy, usually barren and uninhabited area. McCarthy uses this to his advantage by setting the primary location of the novel in a desert. The scene where Moss walks into the aftermath of a massacre and finds the bag of money is significant because he found the money in a desert surrounded by multiple dead bodies. As seen earlier on in this novel, the laws are very unstable, since there is a crime committed almost every day based off of textual evidence, and the inhabitants in the community seem to act without a moral code or any moral ethics, hence the violent events that take place throughout the story. The desert resembles the emptiness that McCarthy is attempting to show because dead bodies in general tend to seem hollow since they begin to turn pale and look lifeless. Once people are dead, they no longer have souls and they do not make as great of an impact as they used to make while they were alive and walking on the face of the Earth. The bodies in the desert surrounding the money have lived meaningless lives and meaningless deaths.

McCarthy also uses the desert setting to symbolize isolation to show that no one person can hide forever. As said before, the story takes place in Texas, close to Mexico, and it is just a large area of desert. The area is filled with small towns spread out over a distance with a very small population of people living in each community. The antelopes that Llewelyn Moss is hunting in the beginning of the novel exhibits how the setting, or the terrain would not allow them to avoid fate. When Moss is walking around the area looking for prey to hunt, he easily spotted a group of antelopes out in the open. So, he no longer focuses on the antelopes themselves, but he is now looking for a good perching spot in order to get a clean shot on his prey. When Moss finds the spot that he wants to use for shooting, he easily puts the animals back in his sight saying, “They’d not moved far from where he last saw them but the shot was still a good seven hundred yards...There was no other cover and there wasn’t going to be any other shot”(9).When Moss firsts aims and takes his first shot at the group of antelopes, he misses. While reloading his rifle, Moss had to remove his eyes from the location of the prey and focus on reloading his rifle. While this is taking place, it would seem realistic for the antelopes to go and hide behind cover in their surroundings in order to avoid being targeted a second time. But when Moss finishes reloading his gun and gets back into position, McCarthy says, “When he pulled the animals back into the scope he could see them all standing as before.”(10), The setting of the hunt, which is also the setting throughout the novel, shows that the antelopes

have nowhere to hide from Moss, so all they can do is take off running in the distance - which is what every character with a problem tends to do - but they are still easily tracked. McCarthy says, “ They were standing looking at the plume of dust where the bullet had hit. Then they bolted...It took him some forty minutes to cross the barrial. From there he made his way up a long volcanic slope and followed the crest of the ridge southeast to overlook above the country into which the animals had vanished”(ibid). As we can see the area is so barren that if Moss put effort into actually finding the antelopes, he would have because he easily followed the path that they had taken. This same interaction is constantly seen throughout the story while Anton Chigurh, the predator or hunter, is tracking and hunting down his prey, Llewelyn Moss. Late in the fourth chapter, Chigurh tracks down Moss for the first time at a motel. Once found, it became a shootout and a massacre between Chigurh, Moss, and civilians. Moss is able to get away but not without a problem - he was shot in the side. After being shot, Moss ran off and went into hiding. However, the spot would not stop anyone from finding him. In the next few scenes, readers see Carson Wells locate Moss in his hiding spot, and then they begin to have a conversation. Wells says one thing in the conversation that ties into the theme of no one can hide forever. While Wells is warning Moss of Chigurh, Moss says, “What makes you think I won’t just disappear?” and Wells responds with, “Do you know how long it took me to find you… About three hours(152). It’s not the only way he has of finding you.”(154). This is a reference to the initial claim that no person can hide from fate forever. Wells is telling Moss about Chigurh’s violent actions and how he will stop at nothing to find him and kill him for the money. The significance of the conversation is that Wells easily found Moss - it is hard to hide or disappear when there is nothing but open space. Wells basically tells Moss that his fate is inevitable - Anton Chigurh will find him.

Cormac McCarthy uses the law enforcement, specifically the sheriffs, to show the instability of the law in the novel. Throughout the novel, readers witness the actions, responses, and conversations between sheriffs, and it is seen that they are not as efficient as they could be. They do not have an urgency to enforce the law, and they do it for money instead of for the greater good of the community. Throughout the first few chapters, readers are witnesses of just some of the many crimes that take place in Texas. Usually, the second things begin to take a turn for the worst, the cops are either on the scene or on the way, But in this setting, after every incident, the sheriffs are late to the scene and tend to do what is best for them instead of what is best for the town. The law enforcement has gone so far downhill, that even the civilians are questioning them, asking if they care about them anymore, or if they should even believe what they say. In the fifth chapter, readers see Sheriff Bell have a conversation with Moss’s wife, Carla Jean, about her husband. During the conversation, she asks Bell, “Do you really care?”(132). She asks the sheriff this to make sure that he is not one of the cops who has converted and is now only “doing their job” for money. Then when Sheriff Bell responds, she goes on to say, “ You’re asking me to believe what you say. But you’re the one sayin[g] it”(133). This scene alone shows how the power and the meaning of the law enforcement has diminished because during the scene Carla Jean is constantly checking for affirmation, to see if her husband is in the right hands with these sheriffs - questioning their purpose.

Cormac McCarthy uses Llewelyn Moss, Sheriff Bell, and Anton Chigurh in order to show their perspectives of law or “higher law” in order to show how the diminishing society takes justice into their own hands. These three main characters all may have different characteristics, but they all have one thing in common - they all take the want to serve justice. Throughout the novel, we see how corrupt people in the city, even the police, have become. Even though all of the other sheriffs have become lazy and uncommitted, Sheriff Bell is the one good policeman

left. He is the one sheriff that tries to keep the system together and give people hope. He can be seen as a representative of the community's belief in justice and the legal system. He truly cares for the people he helps, such as comforting and reassuring Carla Jean that he would do everything in his power to find her husband. In the beginning of the novel, readers are introduced to Sheriff Bell who, we see early on, questions the system of justice that he works under. Dealing with someone as psychotic as Anton Chigurh, Bell's outlook on society and the law begins to waver. It is not until towards the end of the novel when Sheriff Bell realizes that it is pointless to try and uphold the law, causing him to resign from his position. Before making the decision, he comes to a realization, suspecting that God does not care about simple human affairs. His resignation could also be seen as a form of surrender - he surrenders his old views of justice originating from a higher law - and on a larger scale, his resignation could resemble the end of a society that only crumbled from the time that he took up the role of sheriff up until the end of his career. This can be confirmed from Sheriff Bell's monologue at the beginning of the second chapter saying, "I don't know if law enforcement work is more dangerous now than what it used to be or not...You don't see that so much no more, but maybe you see worse"(10). Bell talks about how he has witnessed the society change with his own eyes. In this same monologue, he then goes on to describe a time when he was almost shot by some drug dealers on the border. This marks the first time Sheriff Bell begins to question whether he and the law enforcement can bring these dangerous men to justice. McCarthy makes Llewelyn Moss's perspective and understanding of the justice system and "higher law" rests somewhere in between Sheriff Bell's, and Anton Chigurh's - whose point of view will be analyzed next. Moss's understanding is seen as in between because he acts outside of the law, similar to Chigurh, and this seen when refuses with the sheriff during their encounters. But he also believes that he can avoid the fate that was prophesied in Chigurh's philosophy, and this is seen when he refuses to surrender to Chigurh about his wife, Carla Jean's life. The different events in the novel change the main characters' view of justice and "higher law." Although he strives to overcome his situation, with Chigurh, by only using self-determination, in the end, he fails and realizes that self-determination is not enough to overcome the external forces of the universe. Anton Chigurh's perspective of the law and justice system is the complete opposite of Sheriff Bell and his is based on his personal philosophies. He believes that "higher law" stems from chance and the chaotic order of the universe. Because he does not believe in a "higher law" that is overseen by God, he feels free to act outside of the system in which Bell operates. As said earlier, the characters' point of views are shifted based off of their experiences. In the end, it is seen that even Anton Chigurh - the main antagonist - cannot even avoid his own philosophy of justice. This is seen in the end of the novel after he has killed Llewelyn Moss and Carla Jean, when he gets into the car accident minutes after killing Carla Jean. This shows that even though he may seem outside of the aura of justice and its consequences sometimes, he is still exposed to the chaos and fate of the universe that is resembled in his philosophy.

Cormac McCarthy uses Llewelyn Moss and Sheriff Bell in order to the characters' struggles with corruption, and corruption as a whole in the society. The setting of No Country for Old Men is set near the American/Mexican border just before president Reagan declared "the war on drugs" in 1982. Throughout the novel, it is mentioned that there is a struggle for power in military operations. This is significant because they this sets the scene for Moss to find a bag of money that created a plot to begin with in the first place. Moss's discovery of the briefcase can represent the consequences of a business brought up in corruption and greed. Throughout the novel, readers witness Sheriff Bell fighting an internal battle because his whole career as a sheriff was created in dishonesty. Many achievements he received were not truly earned, but given to him by corrupt law enforcement. For example, he was not worthy of the bronze star that

he got in World War II and he was aware of this - because he was the last good sheriff who believed in true justice - and he had tried to turn down the award. However, the society had become so corrupt that he was basically forced to accept the reward because if he turned it down it would make the American aid in Europe look worthless. The higher authority in the novel has become so corrupt that doing the right thing and having ethics does not matter - as said earlier - but they are more worried about the image they show to other people.

Cormac McCarthy describes the main characters' - Llewelyn Moss, Sheriff Bell, and Anton Chigurh - point of view throughout the novel to show the morality and ethics of themselves and the other characters in the novel in order to show how they these philosophies no longer play a big role in the society, overall showing its deterioration. Ethics would fall under the Ethos category of Aristotle's philosophy of ethos, pathos, logos. Ethos, better known as ethics, is based off of someone's character. Pathos os based off of one's emotions, which also created the root "path" - meaning feeling. Logos is based off of logic, or logical reasoning - meaning there should be reasonable facts in order for it be considered as logos. In the novel, readers are introduced to these three completely different men, who each operate with different conceptions of morality and ethics. Sheriff Bell is seen struggling to find a moral center in which he can use to explain the violence that he witnesses and becomes a victim to throughout the novel. When he first became a sheriff, he was introduced to the law in which he perceived as a reference point for morality, but as said earlier, these thoughts begin to shift when he watches his own community become corrupt with his own eyes. Llewelyn Moss does not operate within the norm, but instead based off of his own internal moral compass. Anton Chigurh is the complete opposite of Moss since he operates outside of all morals and ethics. He does not follow any of the philosophies known to man, which also confuses readers because before he executes his victims, he has conversations with them and makes them think by asking philosophical questions - contradicting his character. Chigurh acts in ways that challenge people's attempts to create a moral framework or guideline for their lives. Throughout the novel, there seems to be an internal battle within all three of these characters, and it stems from the environment around them and forces them to act according to how they feel - based off of their ethics. The society's corruption has shaped their mindset into not knowing what is ethically right or wrong. Corruption is one of the main sub-reasons for the deterioration of the society in No Country for Old Men.