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# A Lawman in a Lawless Age: Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and the Collapse of Moral Order in No Country for Old Men

**Shivani Lingamneni**

*Junior Research Project, India.*

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**Abstract** - Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* presents Sheriff Ed Tom Bell as a figure caught between an inherited moral tradition and a rapidly transforming world marked by senseless violence, cultural fragmentation, and ethical ambiguity. This paper discusses the way Bell reflects and experiences reveal the disintegration of an older system of moral order that had previously given law, justice, and community its coherence. By critically examining three significant tensions Bell fails to understand the increasingly patternless violence he experiences, his declining role as an elder in younger generations and current social ideals, and the unresolved sense of guilt he endures about the World War II, this paper has proposed that Bell and his struggle is not a matter of individual difficulty. McCarthy sets Bell as a witness to a nation that has lost the moral premises upon which he has based his identity and he is thus left to face the boundaries of conventional justice in a world where chance and brutality are the order of things. This is what makes the retirement of Bell an act of recognition but not defeat: a concession that the ethical system he attempted to enact can no longer host or explain the forces which are in the process of defining the new America. By tracing the interplay between memory, morality, and societal change, this article highlights how McCarthy uses Bell's narrative to interrogate what is lost when a culture moves beyond the values that once grounded it.

**Keywords** - Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, moral order, generational displacement.

## 1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* confronts readers with a world in which long-standing moral assumptions collapse under the weight of modern violence and cultural transformation. At the center of this disruption stands Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, an aging lawman whose reflections frame the novel's central ethical inquiry: what happens when the values that once structured a society no longer provide meaning or order? The battle of Bell is not just the battle of old age; but it is the battle of a man who has lost the inner compass of moral that no longer fits the outer world he is vowed to defend. The violence of the drug-war that unleashes all over Texas, the fracturing social scene, and even the moral grayness of characters such as Anton Chigurh all compel Bell to deal with the growing difference between memory and modern reality.

This article examines Bell's displacement within what he calls the "New America," arguing that his failure is not due to personal inadequacy but to the erosion of the moral framework that once defined law, justice, and communal responsibility. A close analysis of the monologues by Bell as well as the key moments in the novel, this paper will bring out the way that McCarthy employs the Bell narrative to comment on larger cultural changes in understanding violence, generational values and the role of guilt in defining moral identity. Instead of depicting Bell as a vestige of the past, McCarthy reflects him as a witness of an ethical change, which he has not been able to avoid, nor to completely understand. Through this, *No Country for Old Men* raises timeless questions concerning the loss of something when tradition is forgotten and how people live in the world where this tradition is no longer upheld in any respect.



## 2. Literature Review

The contemporary criticism related to *No Country for Old Men* always places Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in a place of interpretive grounding to comprehend the ethical and cultural climate of the novel. In literary, philosophical, and cultural criticism, Bell is interpreted as an author whose conservative moralism is failing under the onslaught of violence of the late-twentieth century, generational transformation, and institutional breakdown. Instead of viewing the restrictions of Bell as individual failure, academics put his crisis in the context of a wider degradation of moral sanity in American society. The literature highlights the fact that the struggle of Bell is an indication of the structural change in law enforcement, masculinity, and the narratives by which communities used to comprehend justice. Combined, these analyses shed light on the ways that McCarthy employs the reflective voice of Bell to trace the fall of a common moral order and to reveal the frailty of the institutions that were supposed to support the moral order.

### 2.1. *Bell as Moral Center and Lamenting Narrator*

Bell is often cited by critics as the moral center of the novel due to his introspective monologues which are the ethical context in which the readers experience the world of violence McCarthy has crafted. According to scholars, Bell bases his worldview on the traditions of his heritage belief in religion, in the power of law, in the care of a family and in the collective sense of duty that was characteristic of the rural life in the United States of the middle of the century. However, these sources of meaning can be seen as less and less sufficient as Bell has to face the consequences of drug-trade violence and mysterious cruelty of Anton Chigurh. Research also points to the fact that Bell fails not necessarily in courage, but in vision: the ethical language in which he operates cannot be applied to the social realities that are playing out before him. His subsequent retirement is thus very much seen as not so much as a renunciation of the responsibility but as an acknowledgment of the fact that the governing moral grammar of his world has lost its hold. In this sense, Bell becomes less a functioning lawman and more a lamenting narrator whose voice mourns the loss of a moral consensus that once structured both community and personal identity.

### 2.2. *Violence, Theodicy, and the Limits of Law*

A lot of research literature studies the crisis of Bell within the theological and philosophical context and takes his plight as an unsuccessful bid to come to terms with inexplicable violence and a just universe. The arguments developed in these readings are that McCarthy introduces the world where suffering is not morally intelligible and narratively contained, thus losing the belief of Bell in causality, divine justice and the ability of law to enforce order. According to scholars, Chigurh is also arbitrary and describes his violence as internal, and this acts as a contrast to Bell, who believes that what you do in this world will come back to you. Also, in this vein, Chigurh is an anti-theodicy agent: a reminder that both legal systems and religious systems could not be depended upon to explain or contain the types of violence that appear in the late-twentieth-century American Southwest. As a result, the institutional authority, in general, is undermined as Bell exits her office. According to critics, McCarthy is showing that the law is not the power that can contain violence, but instead the system that can only observe the consequences of this violence, which indicates how violent and unstable moral and court systems that were supposed to be stable can become.

### 2.3. *Aging, Masculinity, and Generational Displacement*

Scholarship on aging and masculinity situates Bell within a tradition of Western heroes whose identity depends on mid-century ideals of masculine responsibility, courage, and moral certainty. But these competencies that critics suggest were once vital to the achievements of being a sheriff, veteran, and community leader, are rendered increasingly ineffective according to critics, in the more technologically accelerated, economically globalized, and morally ambiguous world of the 1970s borderlands. According to the work of researchers like Saxton, the crisis that Bell faces is inherently one of a generation: he is a generation of men to be taught how to negotiate interpersonal struggles and local drug crime, not the international drug economies and unfeeling violence that define the modern. Such a misfit makes the previously successful model of white, rural, masculine authority of Bell irrelevant. Furthermore, critics have argued that the story by Bell also saddens with the decay of a previous moral order, as well as discloses the constraints and exclusions the previous moral order has. Bell reveals the precarity of basing moral authority on one cultural, generational, and gendered identity in admitting that he is

not able to protect the community. His feeling of alienation therefore is a kind of personal accounting as well as a critique of the larger forms of culture that produced him.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This paper uses three overlapping theoretical approaches moral philosophy, cultural sociology, and narrative theory to critique the crisis of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men*. First, the theories of moral philosophy especially virtue ethics and the issue of moral discontinuity can be applied to explain the difficulties Bell had to face in trying to find a balance between the moral code that he inherited and the new moral environment the novel introduces. According to philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre, moral coherence requires continuity between past and present traditions; in case these traditions become discontinuous, it creates a sense of loss of meaning and purpose in people. This break can be illustrated by the thinking of Bell: the principles according to which he previously arranged his perceptions of justice, duty, and society do not fit the patterns of violence and social activity he experiences now. Through this theoretical prism, we find that Bell is not just a sentimentalist but a character who is facing the demise of the moral institutions that once constituted the ethical action.

The second theoretical dimension can be developed based on the sociological culture and the analysis of late-modernity, especially the idea that the speed of social and technological change may undermine communal norms and can cause generation alienation. Modern societies are viewed by scholars like Zygmunt Bauman or Anthony Giddens as fluid, uncertain, and having less power in traditional institutions. The fact that Bell is lost in the face of new types of crime, the changing cultural behaviors and the generational gap represents this sociological state. He cannot blend the present and the past not because he is confined but because of a general cultural shift whereby age-old social structures family, religion, local policing is no longer able to provide the stabilization.

Lastly, the narrative theory gives a methodological basis to the interpretation of the monologues of Bell as interpretive mechanisms, which order the ethical question of the novel. The application of a reflective first person voice makes Bell both an actor in and an observer of the events that he is recounting, allowing McCarthy to contrast the outer acts of violence with the inner acts of moral contemplation. This construction foreshadows the issue of lived experience and interpretive meaning that, as we will see, is a theme in the narrative of a world that no longer fits into the narratives employed to make sense of it. By combining these two theoretical methods, the analysis contextualizes the Bell crisis in grand philosophical, cultural, narrative contexts and proves the idea that his displacement is not a personal struggle, but also a moral, social change that occurred on a larger scale.

### 4. Analysis and Discussion

#### 4.1. Violence beyond Moral Pattern: Bell and the Rise of Senseless Crime

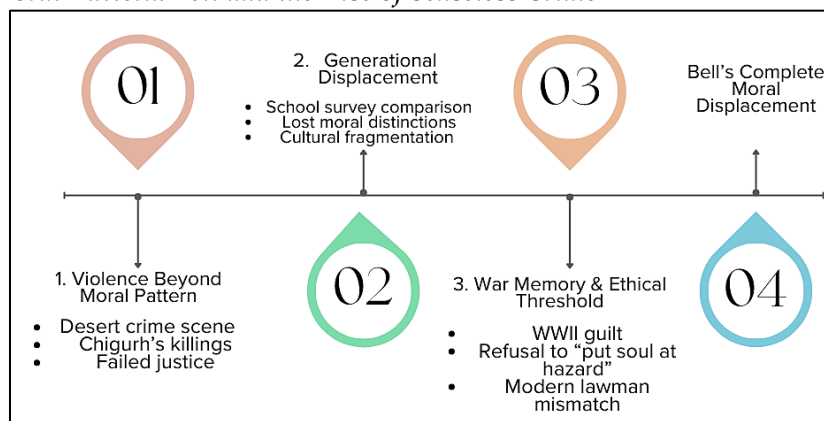


Fig.1 Structural Overview of Bell's Crisis

One of the ways Sheriff Bell struggles to find his place in the "New America" is through the violence he can no longer understand or stop. The crimes he investigates are not just worse than what he is used to; they feel colder, emptier, and less human. This becomes clear early on with the desert crime scene—multiple bodies left in the aftermath of a drug deal gone wrong, abandoned vehicles, and no survivors to question. The violence is extreme, but there is also a strange absence of logic or resolution. As the killings continue, especially through

Anton Chigurh’s random and mechanical executions, Bell begins to feel that the world no longer follows the moral patterns he once trusted. When Bell says, “I believe that whatever you do in your life it will get back to you. If you live long enough it will” (281), he shows that he still wants to believe in a world where justice eventually arrives. He hopes that people will face consequences for their actions. But what he sees around him contradicts that hope. Llewelyn Moss, though flawed, is trying to survive, yet he is murdered before Bell can reach him. Carla Jean, who is innocent and uninvolved in the crimes, is killed by Chigurh after he flips a coin and claims he is keeping a promise.

These events make it clear that Bell’s belief in justice is growing harder to defend. He later admits, “I have sort of waited for all of this to go away... and of course it aint” (281-282). This line is painful because it reveals how deeply he hoped the world would fix itself. He believed that, with time, life would settle back into the old patterns he trusted. But instead, the violence has continued, and it has left him behind. Bell feels powerless, not just as a sheriff, but as a man trying to live by values that the world no longer respects. Criminals are no longer afraid of lawmen, and the crimes are so chaotic that they seem impossible to stop. Bell’s idea of justice is fading, and with it, his sense of purpose. His entire identity is built on helping people and doing what is right, but in this new version of America, that is no longer enough. A similar moment arises when Bell discusses a news story about a couple who killed the elderly just to steal their Social Security checks an act so cruel and purposeless that it leaves him speechless. He is beginning to realize that no matter how hard he tries, he cannot bring order to a world that has chosen chaos.

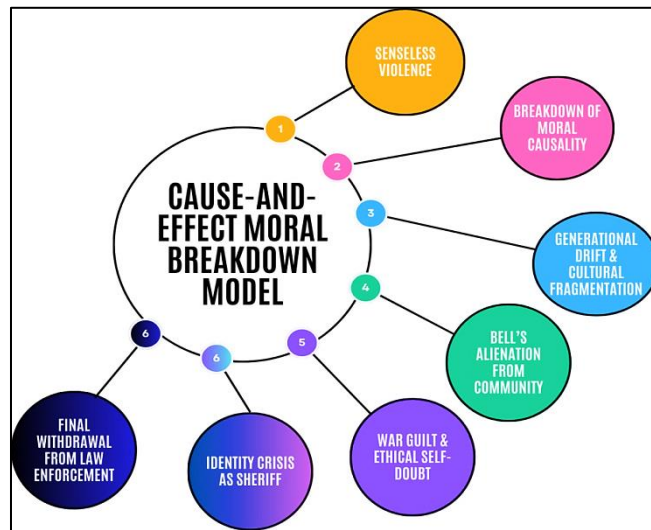


Fig. 2 Cause-and-Effect Moral Breakdown Model

#### 4.2. Generational Displacement and Cultural Fragmentation

Another way Sheriff Bell struggles to define his place in the “New America” is through his growing disconnection from the way people think now, especially younger generations. He notices that the values he was raised with—duty, morality, responsibility—have faded or shifted into something he can no longer recognize. One moment that stays with him is when he reads about a survey comparing school problems across decades. In the 1930s, students listed issues like “talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework” (196). However, when the same survey was repeated forty years later, the answers had changed to “Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide” (196). This contrast feels like a turning point for Bell, proof that the world he grew up in no longer exists. What used to be minor misbehavior has been replaced by violence and tragedy. He says, “that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I’ve got” (196), which shows how deeply he believes the country has lost its moral compass. For Bell, the problem is not only that things have gotten worse, but that society can no longer distinguish between small wrongs and serious evil. This breakdown in judgment makes him feel even more isolated.

He also reflects on how unrecognizable younger generations have become to their own families, saying, “These old people I talk to, if you could of told them that there would be people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they could not even understand, well, they just flat out

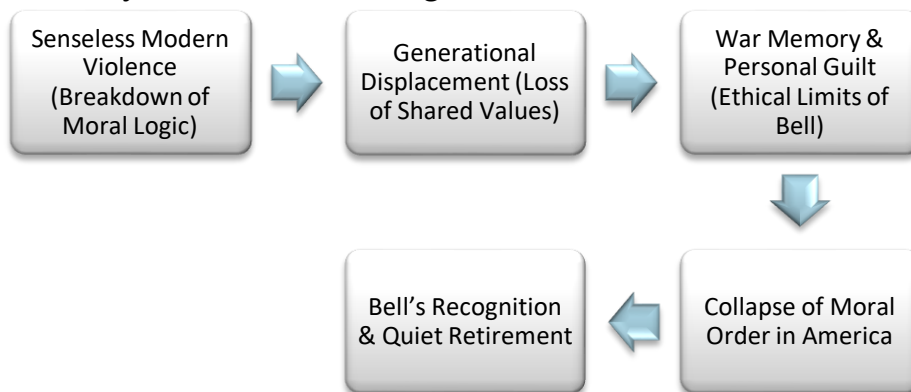
would not of believed you. But what if you had told them it was their own grandchildren?" (295). In this line, Bell is not simply criticizing fashion or language. He is expressing grief over the disappearance of shared cultural understanding. Even family ties, once a source of continuity, now feel broken by difference. This disconnection is made even sharper when Bell tells a story about a woman who wants her granddaughter to have access to abortion, and he responds, "well mam I dont think you have any worries about the way the country is headed... she'll be able to have an abortion... she'll be able to have you put to sleep" (197). Though extreme, the comment shows how powerless Bell feels in a world where human life, tradition, and family bonds no longer seem to carry weight. For Bell, the question is not whether change is happening, but whether the change is leading to a complete moral collapse. He is not just afraid of change. He feels like he has already been replaced by it. As he continues to watch the country shift further from the values he lived by, he becomes more certain that he no longer belongs.

**4.3. War Memory, Personal Guilt, and Bell's Ethical Threshold**

The most personal way Sheriff Bell struggles to define his place in the "New America" is through the guilt he carries from World War II and how it shapes his refusal to become the kind of lawman that modern violence seems to require. He confesses, "I was supposed to be a war hero and I lost a whole squad of men. Got decorated for it. They died and I got a medal. I dont even need to know what you think about that" (195). Though others praised him, Bell never accepted the version of events that made him a hero. He believes he failed, and that belief influences the way he sees himself in the present. That same sense of helplessness resurfaces when he moves through the crime scene filled with corpses in the desert, unable to stop or even understand what happened.

Later, after Moss is tracked across motels and murdered before Bell can reach him, and after he fails to stop the killing of a young deputy in Eagle Pass, Bell realizes he is once again too late. But it is not just a matter of speed or age. It is that the rules of justice have changed. Early in the novel, before the plot even begins, Bell admits, "I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job... If you ain't they'll know it. They'll see it in a heartbeat"(4). He understands that courage is part of the role, but then adds something more revealing: "I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would" (4). This is not just fear. Bell knows that surviving in this "New America" might require him to become like Chigurh emotionless, calculating, and detached from any traditional sense of right and wrong. Bell refuses. To him, his "soul" represents his moral compass, his belief in decency, mercy, and a world where lawmen protect rather than destroy. In a country that now seems to reward cruelty and lack of morality, he will not become the kind of sheriff it demands. Therefore, when he steps down at the end of the novel, it is not simply a retirement. It is a quiet and painful recognition that he no longer fits within a justice system that no longer honors the values he spent his life defending.

**5. Synthesis: Bell as a Symbol of a Vanishing Moral Order**



**Fig. 3 Thematic Convergence Model**

The struggle of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men* cannot just be acknowledged using one of the aspects of violence, the generational displacement, and the guilt of war. Rather, it is the combination of these forces that causes the crisis experienced by Bell, which brings out a various aspect of the moral order that is there falling around him. The drug trade with its absurd cruelty undermines his faith in the causal nature of morality;

the changes in culture and generations that happen throughout America weaken his trust in shared values; and the sense of not being able to eliminate the guilt he felt after the World War II destroys his faith in his own moral authority. All of these pressures make Bell incapable of living the role of the protector that previously characterized him and also his concept of what it meant to serve his community. His confusion thus cannot be regarded as a personal failure but rather the experience of a man who is at the borders between two conflicting worlds.

In all these conflicting struggles, Bell is turned into a symbolic figure instead of being a character in the story. He represents an older ethical tradition based on loyalty, responsibility, religion and social wholeness values which once defined not only the American understanding but its judicial institutions. In the face of the occurrences that cannot be explained by this set of principles, McCarthy relies on his voice to drama up the loss of common ethical language. The thoughts of Bell indicate not only his confusion, but also the instability of moral certainties that formed the world of mid-century America. The fact that he is unable to come to terms with the past and the present drives home McCarthy point: that the moral order that Bell embodies could not possibly have been as stable as he had thought, and that the breakdown of it reveals certain cultural weaknesses long in incubation. Finally, this can be viewed as transformative and Bell acknowledges this change. His withdrawal does not imply that he is just retiring but it is rather the ultimate acceptance that the world, which he had been trained to guard, is unrecognizable. By retiring, Bell initiates the age of skepticism in moral clarity and the justice which is foreseeable. His struggle reveals the human cost of societal change, and his quiet grief gestures toward the broader cultural questions the novel poses: What happens when the values that once shaped a nation no longer align with its reality? And what of them who still believe in them? It is McCarthy who puts Bell as the final eye-witness to a dying moral sight a character who is not only grieving over the world which has gone but also over the world, as it might never come back.

## **6. Conclusion**

The path of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men* is the one that in the end shows the tremendous effects of the society in quick change of moral and cultural shift. In the experiences of Bell with meaningless violence, change in the values of the generation, and unresolved personal guilt, McCarthy shows how conventional moral systems may fail to make sense in the conditions of the contemporary reality. The inherited beliefs about justice, cause, responsibility, and communal order, used by Bell to explain the world, are no longer sufficient in explaining it as it grows more and more influenced by randomness, moral ambiguity and impersonal forms of brutality. His struggle reveals the boundaries of a culture of continuity and tradition in the face of a social environment that no longer favors such suppositions. Simultaneously, Bell story makes the readers think about the loss that comes with movement of a society out of the moral framework that holds it together. His monologues show not just a feeling of nostalgia but also a profound feeling of lamentation about a common moral language that once enabled communities to know what is right and what is wrong. The feeling of alienation between him and the younger generations, the destruction of the difference between minor deviance and serious violence, the loss of family and cultural continuity are all harbingers of the disintegration of the previously stable moral order. Such inability of Bell to perform well in this altered environment is not a failure of character then, but rather an indication of the loss of meaning that is being experienced in the wider sense around him.

The end of Bell with his retirement is a silent yet firm recognition of this failure. By taking a step outside, he is willing to live in a world where there are forces that cannot accommodate the values he devoted his life to protecting. But his retreat is in itself an act of honor, a betrayal of his moral values that make him who he is. McCarthy employs the last silence of Bell to bring out the main question of the novel, which is what is left of people when the structures that are supposed to lead them, fail to show their perception of the world anymore? The struggle of Bell, and his final ability to see the moral displacement, is an accent to the unchanging problem of tradition and change, as a reminder to the readers of the frailty of the values that societies are basing their sense of place and future on.

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