



“Reality’s Never Been of Much Use Out Here”: *No Country for Old Men* and *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* as Anti-Westerns

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Abstract

A still-smoking gun and a damsel-no-longer-in-distress at the hip, he trots into the endless prairie expanse. He bears hardly a scratch; the black-hatted villains he leaves in his wake deservedly fair much worse. He is courageous, hardy, and noble. He is the mythic cowboy hero of the American West. More than that, he is an earnest, nostalgic representation of American ideals: individualism, goodness, masculinity, and freedom. However, as an endless stream of social movements, wars, and disillusionment commanded the second half of the twentieth century, the cowboy hero faced criticism in an increasingly skeptical and nuanced world. Thus, the traditional American Western went the way of the black hat. In its absence, a subgenre has emerged: the anti-Western, a dismantling of the classic hero. Where the Western saw virtue in a protagonist’s violence, sense of tradition, moral absolutes, and upholding of fixed societal roles, the anti-Western sees these as vices. It is in the anti-Western genre where Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 novel, *No Country for Old Men*, and Annie Proulx’s 1999 short stories from her *Close Range* collection, “The Mud Below” and “Brokeback Mountain,” are found. Whether natural or performative, the protagonists in these stories cling desperately to traditional American Western heroism to detrimental ends, varying from unhappiness to brutalization for themselves and those around them. If there is a hero of the classic Western variety, he surely cannot thrive in the callous and chaotic worlds constructed by McCarthy and Proulx, much less the all-powerful forces of contemporary American culture.

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“Reality’s Never Been of Much Use Out Here”:

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A still-smoking gun and fair maiden at the hip, he trots into the endless frontier. He is courageous, hardy, and noble. He is the mythic cowboy hero of the American West: an earnest, nostalgic representation of American values such as individualism, goodness, masculinity, and freedom. However, as an endless stream of social movements, wars, and disillusionment commanded the second half of the twentieth century, the traditional genre faced irrelevancy in an increasingly skeptical and nuanced world. In its decline, a subgenre has emerged: the anti-Western, a dismantling of the classic hero. It is in the anti-Western genre where Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 novel, *No Country for Old Men*, and Annie Proulx’s short stories from her 1999 *Close Range* collection, “The Mud Below” and “Brokeback Mountain,” are found. Whether natural or performative, the protagonists in these stories cling desperately to traditional American Western heroism to detrimental ends, varying from unhappiness to brutalization for themselves and those around them. If there truly is a hero of the classic Western variety, he surely cannot thrive in the chaotic worlds constructed by McCarthy and Proulx, much less the forces of contemporary American culture.

Few genres conjure up as iconic an image of a protagonist as the American Western: an independent and rugged cowboy caught up in an amoral society. Handy with pistols and knuckles, he uses them to beat justice into those he deems unjust. His authority is never questioned; the lines between good and evil are clearly drawn (Wallmann 30). Firmly on the side of good, he boasts a distinguished ethical code, valuing fairness, truth, and hard work (135). The hero is “an unchanging constant” (Walle 16). Traditionally, his fate is less firm, but irrespective of hardships endured, a classic hero of the American West always succeeds, virtues intact.

The genesis of the American West as a distinct genre is best attributed to writer James Fenimore Cooper in the early nineteenth century (Walle 73). As depicted, the hero “is a moral person whose very morality makes him the antithesis of established culture” (186). Believing the frontier to be a corrupting force, Cooper’s heroes are fated to reject society in favor of a triumphant retreat into the wilderness (198). However, the genre did not reach popularity until the end of the century, spurred by author Owen Wister. Wister’s heroes share personality characteristics with Cooper’s, but their equally victorious fates diverge. Forgoing Cooper’s critical approach, Wister declares the American frontier to breed superiority and success, a notion better received by American audiences (198). Thus, Wister’s stories became the groundwork for typical Western media from the 1890s to the 1960s (190).

An additional contribution to the genre’s popularity was the departure of cowboy life, an aftereffect of industrialization (Wallmann 90). Americans craved a reprieve from their “rapidly changing” world only the classic Western could provide (136). After the Great Depression, these feelings only increased. The genre became “an antidote to public pessimism,” necessary if one believed in personal reinvention after societal collapse (136). As a result, the amount of traditional Western media of all types grew rapidly between 1930 and 1955 (136).

Then in the 1960s and 1970s, a perfect storm of unpopular wars, social movements, political assassinations, and scandals “led to national anger and even despair” (137). With growing awareness of the injustices plaguing the past and present, “Americans were beginning to question the glorious mythology of the frontier” (Walle 166). As a result, embellished Western stories were increasingly considered childish and in poor taste by the general public, leading to a steep decline in media releases and revenue (195). The classic era of the Western was over.

Though the traditional Western had reached its end, that did not extend to the entire genre. In fact, “since their conception, [Westerns] have been . . . bred and crossbred to feed shifting public tastes” (Wallmann 16). Starting in the late twentieth century, the public taste has been sated by the anti-Western, also known as the revisionist Western or the post-Western (Stace). The anti-Western takes the unquestioned values and conflicts of the traditional Western and examines them through the context of fatalism, anachronism, realism, and existentialism. Under this gaze, anti-Western creators find the virtues of the traditional hero problematic and fate their heroes accordingly. There is never a happy ending for a hero of the anti-Western. Either he will hold steadfast to traditional values, resulting in nonheroic, abject failure, or he will abandon them, becoming an anti-hero as amoral as society itself (Wallmann 141; Walle 195).

Heroes in a fatalistic or anachronistic anti-Western are the “vestigial [remains]” of the traditional West (Walle 194). The fatalistic hero, while unflinchingly noble, finds himself ill-equipped to function in the modern world, fating him to either displacement or death (194). The anachronistic hero is typically older. Similarly existing in a modernized world, he is a holdover from traditional times, causing him distress over the way things are headed (Wallman 150).

While traditional Westerns championed “virile heroes winning the West for Truth” and free will, anti-Westerns incorporate elements of realism and existentialism (Wallmann 4). In a

realistic anti-Western, the gild of frontier life is scrubbed off, leaving only improbability and historical issues of greed and violence (4). This cynical look coincides with the even more cynical existentialist Anti-Western. Anti-Westerns of this variety posit an ultimately meaningless universe with the forces of society as all-powerful, giving the hero little autonomy (158).

Of the potential characteristics of an anti-Western, fatalism and anachronism best suit McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Together, the dual protagonists Llewellyn Moss and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell naturally embody the Western hero: Moss fulfilling the physical dimensions and Bell fulfilling the moralistic ones. Yet, while the novel "[feints] toward the conventions of Western heroism", it "[refuses] to deliver them" (Lawrence 4). Although the characters themselves are traditionally Western, their fates are not. Because of their conventional heroism in an unconventional society, they face nonheroic, subdued ends – a hallmark of a fatalistic anti-Western. Moreover, *No Country for Old Men* is anachronistic because it is not an outright condemnation of traditional Western heroism, but wistful. The future is bleak, not due to cultural reverence of the traditional West, but because Western values are no longer held in regard.

No Country for Old Men introduces Llewellyn Moss carrying a pair of binoculars and a high-powered rifle to scope the empty Texan desert, instantly conveying a Western cowboy. He stumbles upon the grisly remains of a heroin deal gone wrong, eliciting skills acquired from his time as a sniper in the Vietnam War: an aptitude for investigating and a familiarity with violence. He surveys the scene with cold precision, leading him to discover a man dying of thirst and a briefcase full of millions of dollars, which he steals. The actions Moss takes here are influenced by his traditionally Western physical prowess – and it plays the first part in his eventual death, as he never would have become caught up in the criminal underworld without it.

Like all classic heroes, Moss is presented as fundamentally decent, making it easy for the audience to align morally with him (Lawrence 6). When he makes the “dumbern hell” decision to return to the desert and give water to the dying man, not only is Moss demonstrating the sense of morality associated with the Western hero, he is plunging himself and those in his proximity headfirst into an inescapable world of violence (McCarthy 24). For Llewellyn Moss, these natural “markers of Western heroism” are not just admirable, but deadly, thus making him a fatalistic non-hero (Lawrence 6).

Evocative of an anachronistic anti-Western, the novel’s other protagonist Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is deeply troubled over the current state of the country. He says: “I don’t know what is the use of me layin [sic] awake over it. But I do” (McCarthy 159). Much of the narrative is dedicated to his careful meditations on American society, its morality corrupted by a recent bout of carelessness, bad manners, and crime. The nation, as Bell sees it, “is goin [sic] to hell in a handbasket,” a disturbing realization for which he knows no cure (196).

Bell may think a lot about society, but society does not think much of him. However empathetic, contemplative, and family-oriented he may be, his strong moral code – an attribute of the traditional hero – hinders him. Bell laments: “[Criminals] don’t even think about the law” (216). The law and its enforcers are too anachronistic to handle the amoral town. Realizing this, Bell retreats, retiring as sheriff without resolving his troubles. It is a joyless decision, bearing a nonheroic feeling “more bitter than death”: defeat (306).

If any anti-Western author is a frontier “myth [basher],” it is Annie Proulx (Meldrum 2). Though of the same genre, Proulx’s *Close Range* shares none of *No Country for Old Men*’s sentimentalism for the traditional Western, providing a merciless glimpse of frontier reality. Unlike Moss and Bell, the protagonists in *Close Range*’s “The Mud Below” and “Brokeback

Mountain” are not Western heroes by nature, they must conform to meet those standards. This demonstrates the existential nature of the Western hero, a fundamentally unattainable and paradoxical yet culturally ingrained ideal. The lives of these characters are harsh, resembling the historical reality of the cowboy. As pointed out by Lee Clark Mitchell, it is a life characterized by being “overworked, underfed, poorly paid, and ill-educated” (qtd. in Arosteguy 3). The Western hero cannot exist naturally; he must be excruciatingly performed, damaging men and the people around them to shape a bleak future.

Applicable to the realism aspect of the anti-Western genre, “The Mud Below” is a vicious examination of Diamond Felts, a career bull rider. As a young man lacking in sexual experience, height, and power, the Western hero is not only aspirational, but an ideal Diamond will obtain by any means necessary. Bull-riding is a “rough, bruising life,” yet it is one he would choose over the life his mother had otherwise set for him: college and subsequent resettlement into his hometown (Proulx 52). For Diamond, the rapturous and volatile nature of bull-riding is a perfect opportunity to live up to traditional Western heroism – but he cannot (Arosteguy 4). By performing the physical traits of the cowboy hero, he cannot realistically fulfill the moral ones. Instead, Diamond’s desperate attempts for heroism are antiheroic. His righteous violence is disproportionately inflicted unto himself and innocents. His independence causes isolation. His hard work keeps him impoverished. Though nonetheless stuck in this lifestyle, the accompanying “euphoric heat” becomes nothing more than a memory (Proulx 80).

Included also in Proulx’s *Close Range* collection is perhaps her most recognizable story, “Brokeback Mountain,” an existential exploration of homosexuality and Western expectations. Early in his life, protagonist Ennis Del Mar learns the deadly consequences of deviating from the traditional Western norm when his father takes him to see the brutalized remains of a gay man in

their community. These lessons follow Ennis for the rest of his life; when he falls in love with another man, Jack Twist, the two are still determined to cultivate a traditional cowboy appearance. This is evident in Ennis' and Jack's decision to openly pursue heterosexual lifestyles, relegating their relationship to infrequent meetings "way the hell out in the back a nowhere" (Pullen 156; Proulx 270). Their yielding to traditional Western standards denies them fulfillment, so they lash out forcefully to compensate. Ennis becomes more dismissive and combative, while Jack grows impatient. Ultimately, this culminates in Jack's violent, implicitly homophobic death when he finally refuses to concede. Likewise, Ennis faces lifelong anguish for conceding. In this existential anti-Western, the cowboy archetype is both omnipotent and futile, inciting misery for those who attempt to follow it and retribution for those who do not.

As a source of nostalgia and escapism, the American public has long been enamored with the traditional American Western genre. Recently, it has seen a sharp decline, coinciding with disillusionment. Its contemporary replacement is the anti-Western: A fatalistic, anachronistic, realistic, and existential approach to the genre. There are no happy endings; the hero will always succumb to societal pressure or failure. Examples of the anti-Western are Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and Annie Proulx's *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. McCarthy's protagonists are traditionally Western by nature in a nontraditional world, leading to destructive, if sympathetic, ends. Proulx looks satirically at her protagonists and their classically Western ambitions in "The Mud Below" and "Brokeback Mountain." In both, the traditional Western hero ideal is considered unsustainable, absurd, or even insidious in modern America, causing misery for the men themselves and others, cementing these stories into the anti-Western genre.

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