No Country for Old Men as Existential Confession

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Confessions are one of the staples of existential literature. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Camus' *The Fall* can be understood as quintessential confessions. These confessions are meant to deepen the reader's understanding of agency and freedom from a haunting angle. Ultimately, the dark side of conscious agency is the fact that each human being must live with their choices. The guilt, shame, denial, and regret that arise are all manifestations of this. In confessions, these aspects of human existence are brought to the forefront. Oftentimes, experimental narrative techniques are deployed to express the anguish of the character and to give the reader a more truthful depiction of what it means to be tortured by one's existence. In the case of *Notes from Underground*, this manifests as winding, paradoxical, philosophical detours, and in *The Fall*, this manifests as a strange second-person point of view in which the whole novel's text is one monologue. What separates these confessions as distinct from the pattern of criminality that appears in other works of existential literature is the notable fact that these confessional narratives do not revolve around a criminal as their central character. The narrators of existential confessions are not primarily concerned with the legality or social acceptableness of their actions, but more with their own understanding of themselves.

American Existentialism is much more subtle than the quintessential examples stated above, but the same patterns emerge. Readers get an up-close view of confession in works like Stoner and *No Country for Old Men*. Here, I'll be exploring Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* in a way that it has yet to be understood: as an existential confession of the central character, Sheriff Bell.

The majority of *No Country for Old Men* moves quickly. One moment, the reader is in the quiet deserts of Western Texas alongside a lonesome morning hunter, the next the reader is plunged into a series of events that seem to whip across the page so quickly that they leave afterimages. With such an intensely violent, swift narrative, the confessional nature of the work takes a backseat for many readers. This is precisely why the moments of reflection that are offered in the book are so important. The most obvious of these moments are the ones offered at the beginning of each new chapter, presented in italics as perhaps Sheriff Bell's diary, monologue, or simply as his thoughts. With thirteen of these total, the confessions range from abstract, cultural musings to deeply personal, explicitly confessional ones. Certain sections in particular can be read side-by-side with *The Fall* and *Notes from Underground*. A shift in the tone of these reflections becomes especially important after Sheriff Bell's dialogue with Uncle Ellis, which amounts to Bell's most emotionally-charged scene in the book. The scene details an apparently shameful act that he committed decades ago. A

confession, indeed. Although this scene may act as Bell's existential confessional climax of the book, nonetheless many of the reflections that lead up to it are essential in their own way.

Rather than beginning his first reflection with a personal descriptor like the narrator in *Notes from Underground*, Sheriff Bell actually describes a particular action that he performed years ago. "I sent one boy to the gas chamber at Huntsville. One and only one. My arrest and testimony" (McCarthy 3). In this sense, we might describe the confessional style thus far as more similar to Camus' *The Fall*, as this establishes a high degree of intimacy while also indicating that the author will be using an experimental style to depict the following events. After detailing the case of the only man he ever executed, Bell then goes on to provide ominous statements about the future, hinting what is to come before the narrative shifts into the non-italicized, third person point of view which fills most of the novel.

When readers return to the italicized style on pages 38 and 62, the confession shifts from a place of intimacy to a more externally-driven point of view. The primary concerns in these two sections are no longer Bell himself, but where Bell is situated inside of the framework of the external world. This includes musings about Bell's car being shot on the highway, how the job has changed, why his wife has stopped reading the newspaper, the emergence of new technologies (for both law enforcement and criminals), how the the job of Sheriff was back in his grandfather's day, and then finally a return to the topic of execution which began the first italicized section. This method of situating the confessor within his time period, socioeconomic circumstances, and occupation can be seen as a direct tie to *The Fall*. In *The Fall*, Jean Baptiste-Clamence describes the times that he lives in with an extended metaphor of a boat drifting through foggy waters. Like Bell, Clamence looks to the past as though it were clearer and more discernible than the present is. In the case of Clamence, he looks to his memories of Greece in contrast to the murky shores of the present. "In the Greek archipelago I had the contrary feeling. Constantly new islands would appear on the horizon. Their treeless backbone marked the limit of the sky and their rocky shore contrasted sharply with the sea. No confusion possible; in the sharp light everything was a landmark" (Camus 97). Indeed, a large part of what the confessors in existential literature yearn for is a sense of clarity. In these two cases, such desired clarity is projected onto a past time when things were simpler, and boundaries were more visible. Bell and Clamence feel that they no longer understand the orientation or direction of the present moment. From this angle, both *No Country for Old Men* and *The Fall* use their confessions to diagnose the uneasiness of the modern human. From this point forward in Sheriff Bell's confession, the external circumstances of the present and the personal depths of Bell's psyche begin to swirl together, making his confession (much like *The Fall*'s) one that implicates not just himself.

The next sections seem to provide very little clarity. Bell says a series of almost unconnected things without managing to really express his feelings towards the statements that he provides. The reader also gets the sense that Bell is concealing things, first indicated with: "We lost a girl but I won't talk about that" (McCarthy 90). The reader only realizes later on how important some of these offhand comments are, especially "I was just back from the war. I had some medals and stuff and of course people got wind of that" (McCarthy 90). This obviously hints at one of the central aspects of his later confessional dialogue with Uncle Jack about how he "cut and run" after losing a battle against German troops (McCarthy 276). In this section, readers also get the first explicit religious references from Bell. "I don't recall that I ever give

the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did" (McCarthy 91). Indeed, the first hints of Bell's despair are shown here, as he feels he cannot fully accept the blessings he has received because he is undeserving of them. This is what Bell and the unnamed narrator of *Notes from Underground* have in common. Unlike Clamence, who's conflict appears more atheistic (or secular at the very least), Bell and the Underground Man struggle with a sense of religious despair that prevents them from being able to embrace the supposedly infinite goodness and forgiveness that God provides. Instead of saying "Yes" to the blessings they receive, they ask "Why?" instead. In the case of Bell and the Underground Man, this despair also manifests in their romantic lives: Bell with his wife Loretta and the Underground Man with Liza. As seen in later reflections in *No Country for Old Men*, this comes from the same issue of despair. These concepts of faith and love are deeply interconnected for Bell in particular, as what prompts Bell to mention the Lord in the first place is his description of the first time he met Loretta as he "seen her come out of Kerr's Mercantile and cross the street and she passed me and I tipped my hat to her and got just almost a smile back" (McCarthy 91). Instead of saying "Yes" to potential unconditional love, Bell and the Underground Man ask "Why?" instead.

Bell's despair largely comes from his decision during the second world war. Although not fully revealed just yet, the severity of the situation becomes clearer as it is hinted at. "I won't talk about the war neither. 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" (McCarthy 195). Interestingly enough, Bell's full confession of his act of battlefield cowardice isn't given to readers through an italicized section, but is actually only revealed in his long dialogue with Uncle Ellis. The death of Carla Jean in particular is what rattles Bell enough to finally own up to himself and take stock of his life.

Bell slips back into a style more akin to *The Fall* in the following three italicized sections. This is because the focus once again shifts away from Bell and onto the circumstances that he's found himself in over the years. Although much more brutal and violent than Clamence's day-today life, the same question of how one makes sense of the world returns. Of particular note is the similarity in age between Clamence and Bell. Unlike the Underground Man (who's described as still being middle aged), Clamence and Bell are both old men reflecting on a lifetime of changes and experiences. In this sense, what they desire the most with their confessions is the ability to actually discern their present circumstances and therefore their lives. Since the overall impulse of the confession is to achieve some kind of clarity, the understanding of one's time and one's society must be established. In old age, this question of clarity becomes even more complicated, as the flux of one's life can produce tremendous upheavals of culture, values, customs, and morals throughout the decades.

As the climax of Bell's confession occurs in dialogue form, this signifies Bell stepping out of his own head to actually confess himself aloud to another person, Uncle Ellis. After a long conversation about family history, Bell prompts his disclosure by asking Ellis, "Did you ever do anything you was ashamed of to the point where you never would tell nobody?" (McCarthy 272). After Bell describes how he left his men behind, Ellis actually gives Bell the opportunity to avoid ownership and express bad faith when he says, "You didn't have no choice," to which Bell refuses and responds, "I had a choice. I could of stayed" (277). Keeping in line with other narrators in existential literature, Bell is fully aware of his own free will and the crushing responsibility that comes with it. This disclosure also allows readers to understand Bell within the context of his time, as he admits: "I'm not

the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I'm a man of this time" (McCarthy 279). By the end of the dialogue, Ellis tries his best to console Bell by telling him typical things like it wasn't his fault, he's being hard on himself, etc. In the end, however, both Ellis and Bell recognize that the true act of confessing will be when Bell decides to tell his wife, Loretta.

Sheriff Bell's confession to his wife about his decision to leave his (probably dead) troops behind during World War 2 is the final pivot in Bell's arc which allows him to quit his job as sheriff and move on. As seen with Bell's certain similarities with the Underground Man, Bell believes that his flaws and mistakes will not be accepted by Loretta because he cannot believe that she loves him unconditionally. This process is a common despairing one, as the thought "if only they knew how bad and ugly I really was, they wouldn't love me" has occurred to Bell and the Underground Man in the depths of their psyches. The final scenes of the novel, however, move *No Country for Old Men* into a far more optimistic direction than *Notes from Underground*. Loretta, in her faithfulness and love, chooses to stay with Bell and continue on with him into the next chapter of their lives.

As an existential confession that follows in the footsteps of *Notes from Underground* and *The Fall*, McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* uses multiple, intertwining concepts to paint a complicated character in the midst of a catastrophic landscape. As shown here, Sheriff Bell is indeed a tragic—but ultimately emergent—narrator who shares much in common with the Underground Man and Jean Baptiste-Clamence. Each character yearns for clarity in the midst of ambiguity and has experienced what it truly means to live with the burden of guilt, shame, denial, and regret. Indeed, the most significant purpose of existential confessions is that they serve as warnings. They say to the reader, 'do not be like this.' Far from nihilism, these portrayals give the reader a chance to witness their own ugliness with greater depth and therefore come to terms with it. In the case of McCarthy's novel, the lesson of Sheriff Bell's confession is 'do not wait until you are an old man to finally accept and forgive yourself.'

Works Cited

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