

The Dark Knight and No Country for Old Men: Postmodern villains vs. modern heroes

Two of my favorite movies over the last year are The Dark Knight and No Country for Old Men. On the surface these movies are very different. The Dark Knight is set in a fictitious city, Gotham, with a cartoon-based hero. Meanwhile, No Country is set in West Texas in 1980. Dark Knight showcases spectacular special effects and stunts with an implausible plot while No Country the feel of an Alfred Hitchcock movie with a deliberate pace and realistic action.

While all of this is true I also believe these two films share two things in common: a postmodern villain and a hero who represents a perplexed moral center. I plan to post more on postmodern relativism but in essence it is the belief that there is no objective truth because our inherent prejudices and conceptual shortcomings prevent us from establishing hard and fast principles. Someone who buys consistently buys into postmodern relativism believes they can do anything they want regardless of consequences. A person who believes this will act as if he is an end in themselves while treating others as means to their ends.

Hence you have someone like the Joker in the Dark Knight who sets up situations in which his victims are mere toys for his entertainment. The Joker wants to show that under the right conditions everyone will devolve to his level and kill each other without second thought. Similarly, Anton Chigurh routinely dispatches anyone who gets in his way and at times uses a coin flip, the ultimate in random decision making, to decide if someone will live or die. (A coin flip is also used in Dark Knight but by Harvey Dent, the hero who does succumb to the Joker's arguments.)

To be fair, there does appear to be one key difference between the Joker and Chigurh: the Joker doesn't show much interest in committing crimes in order to obtain money while Chigurh does pursue the \$2,000,000 of drug money. If anything, the Joker represents a more "advanced" stage of devolution than Chigurh who still has the ultimate goal of getting the drug money.

Both movies also feature a hero who fights the evil of the villain without fully gasping why his nemesis acts the way he does. They represent the "modern" worldview (i.e., reflecting the Enlightenment) which holds there is objective truth and sound principles including respect for others. As a result they cannot truly grasp what motivates the Joker or Chigurh. Their confusion and dismay is more clearly expressed by Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in a couple of conversations where he decries the increasing violence and the deteriorating moral condition of the world. Both films share a similar apprehension over the evolution of villains from the petty criminal who steals or robs for personal gain but still plays within some

"rules" to the postmodern villain who merely wants to destroy value for amusement or treats humans as mere nuisances in the way of their goals.

So why do I enjoy these movies given their dark center? Because I think they capture (even if inadvertently) the sign of the times without giving up hope that truth and justice are worth upholding.

[Josh McDowell](#) & Bob Hostetler offer the following definition of postmodernism: "A worldview characterized by the belief that truth doesn't exist in any objective sense but is created rather than discovered." ... Truth is "created by the specific culture and exists only in that culture. Therefore, any system or statement that tries to communicate truth is a power play, an effort to dominate other cultures."^[28]