

The Moral Life and Cultural Collapse

February 6, 2008

Hollywood is often criticized for producing films that are morally lacking, or worse. However, this year's Oscar nominations for best picture, *Atonement*, *Juno*, *Michael Clayton*, *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*, are notable exceptions. All five are, to greater and lesser degrees, morality plays. (The only one I have not seen is *There Will Be Blood*, which was bumped last weekend by *Hanna Montana* in 3-D. Oh well.)

While I have not watched all five films, of those I have seen, the one I found most ethically thought provoking is *No Country for Old Men*. Like traditional morality plays it has a character (a sort of everyman) struggling to remain virtuous in the face of personified vices or evil. Unlike traditional morality plays the moral lesson is subtle—and judging from the audience's mumblings and groans at the end of the showing I attended, maybe too subtle for some tastes.

Most of the characters in the film are far beyond internal moral struggles; they embrace murder and greed with no repulsion. The exception is a slightly over the hill sheriff, a quick witted, good natured guy, who has the bad luck of patrolling the Texas-Mexico border region, which is a gateway for smuggling drugs into the US. The Sheriff's internal struggle is against despair. It's a profound struggle and provides an opportunity to think about the challenge of leading a morally worthy life in the face of cultural collapse.

The Sheriff defines a morally worthy life in terms of the culture and traditions of Texas lawmen. He says that he never misses a chance to hear the stories about that tradition, about the old timers. The defining moral characteristics of the people who lived these stories are courage and justice. For the Sheriff this culture and these virtues define a morally worthy life, and he worries he hasn't measured up.

One has to sympathize with the Sheriff; the odds are stacked against him. It's clear that he has the courage to meet the traditional challenges of a rural peace officer—breaking up fistfights and the like. But as he puts it, he's outmatched. The drug trade has brought an evil into his county that he can't match and can't understand. This evil is personified in what will likely prove to be the classic film villain, Chigurh. The Sheriff describes this murderer as a “ghost” and “prophet of destruction,” and declines to go out and meet him.

The violence in the film is noteworthy, and perhaps too much for many. But it's not gratuitous. From reading news accounts of what's taking place along the Texas-Mexico border it seems appallingly accurate. A *New York Times* article reported that "nine people were found tortured and killed outside the border city of Nuevo Laredo...in a struggle over control of one of Mexico's biggest cocaine cartels." The scene is almost like the one portrayed in the film and Cormac McCarthy's novel. A real life sheriff from Laredo,

Texas was quoted in the press as saying, "It's a war zone. We've got level three body armor. They've got level four...We're outgunned." But what troubles the fictional Sheriff is not that he is outgunned, but that he can't comprehend his enemy.

Again, one of the interesting things about this film, and novel, is it raises the question of how one can live a morally worthy life in the face of a cultural collapse. The Sheriff calls this a breakdown of ethics, which for him begins with the loss of manners, when kids stop saying yes sir and no ma'am, and ends with multiple homicides in the desert. He feels like a stranger in his own country. Most importantly with this cultural breakdown he is no longer able to comprehend the demands of courage.

Courage is often defined as a quality of spirit that allows one to face danger and fear. Hope that one's courageous efforts will be worthwhile sustains this quality of spirit. Further, to face danger one needs to have some understanding of those dangers. So both hope and courage require that one at least partially be able to make sense of a situation--to glimpse a way forward. The Sheriff in *No Country for Old Men* is tempted to despair because he can no longer see a way forward. His life's work seems meaningless and he's ready to throw in the towel.

When I saw this film, it seemed that most of the audience was dissatisfied with the ending. The Sheriff appears to lose out to evil and his struggle against despair. But I think there might be some hope for the Sheriff that he can regain his courage. But it's a small flicker. You'll have to watch the movie to see if you agree, or better yet read the book.