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HON-H226 The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen

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Formal Essay 2

Women are often subjected to roles of the side and objectified in life and entertainment, falling into “traditional” ideologies of what a woman’s role is especially in older Western culture. As shown through Joel and Ethan Coen’s films, their use of women in their artworks are often shown to emphasize the insecurities and insanity that men exude constantly. The Coen brothers implement their use of woman characters in their films as those who are sensible and are surrounded by hysterical men – as is commonly the phenomenon that has infiltrated our real-life society for years. As film auteurs, the Coen brothers aim to expose the idea of toxic masculinity through all kinds of male characters in their films – whether the man has been thrown into the underworld without knowing or not, regardless of being conscious of it, toxic masculinity surfaces – and its effects on reasonable women who fall into situations against their will by being surrounded by insecure and hysterical men.

As the Coens express female characters in their films, they do it in various ways. For example, in *Blood Simple*, Abby was shown to be a female character who was the cause for the intensive love triangle which led to multiple deaths within the film. In *Miller’s Crossing*, Verna was shown to be a typical femme fatale character – similar to the “Spider Woman” explained in Janey Place’s essay, “Women in Film Noir” which is characterized as being evil, a seductress, dark, and tempting (47, 53, 54) – who used her looks and seduction to end up with what she wanted. In *Fargo*, Marge was shown to be a pregnant female character – similar to the

“Nurturing Woman” also explained in Place’s essay which is characterized as the alter-ego of the spider woman, being virgin-esque, a mother figure, innocent, giving love and understanding, a redeemer (47, 60, 61) – in law enforcement who took her job seriously while also caring for her family – being able and competent enough to handle it all – all while not letting her job to take over her life and knowing balance. In *The Big Lebowski*, Bunny was shown as another kind of femme fatale character, but this time seemingly much more objectified and treated as a sex symbol, chasing satisfaction and money – but Maude was shown as her opposite, as a woman who is overly independent to the point where she wants The Dude to have nothing to do with the birth and raising of their potential child. In *No Country for Old Men*, Carla Jean was shown to be a typical Western wife, tending the home and listening blindly to what her husband was telling her, believing that she would be protected, and he had all under control. In *True Grit*, Mattie was shown as another independent young girl determined to do all it takes to seek revenge against the person who killed her father.

In all these films and their female characters listed above, the women have one thing in common: they are all, in their respective films, singular main female characters who are surrounded by multiple main male characters who are hysterical, succumb to insanity, insecure, have in some way fallen into something bigger than they expected, and in way over their heads – therefore exuding traits of toxic masculinity. The women, in these senses, are also therefore subject to the domino effects of the actions of the male characters that surround them. Although they have the liberty to forge their own paths – which they do try to save themselves (in other words) as much as they can – they cannot escape the consequences of their male counterparts’ actions that have undeniably and *potentially* subconsciously subjected the women to the doomed situations as side players. In *Fargo*, Jean was subject to Jerry’s insane staging of her kidnapping

for money which led to her death and in *The Big Lebowski*, Bunny was subjected to being viewed as a ditzy young girl after old money as the Big Lebowski staged her running away for money, too. In two Western Coen films that were originally novels, *True Grit* and *No Country for Old Men*, the Coen brothers have introduced main female characters that are much different from one another but have the same bottom-line similarity of being sane.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the audience is introduced to Carla Jean Moss – Llewelyn Moss' wife – and Loretta Bell – Sheriff Ed Tom Bell's wife – who are shown as two Western wives and women essentially put into the side roles. However, both of these women defy traditional Western characteristics as explained by Pat Tyrer and Pat Nickell in their chapter titled “‘Of what is past or passing, or to come’: Characters as Relics in *No Country for Old Men*” in which they stated, “In traditional Westerns women are supportive, but their role was limited to waving good-bye as husbands and lovers rode away. They were regularly filmed from behind, crisp white aprons tied snugly around trim waists, as the pursuers departed in search of the bad guys,” (93). Although both Carla Jean and Loretta were shown as supportive wives, they were also shown as having minds of their own and not succumbing to the traditional smile-and-nod of older Western culture and stereotypes. In their chapter, Tyrer and Nickell also explain Loretta’s independence and how Sheriff Bell’s retirement was unamusing to her. They stated, “Bell is not welcome at home. He invites his wife to go riding with him, and she tells him, ‘I’m not the one who retired.’ She further refuses his offer to stay and help her with household chores, since she has her own routine. Loretta Bell is no artifact or relic of the myth; she plays a woman with not only her own life, but also her own horse...” (93). Pictured and focused on more was Carla Jean than Loretta, following along with what Llewelyn had planned in terms of the \$2 million he

stumbled upon and was too greedy to let go of – showing his hysterical character of being willing to risk his life, and the lives of his loved ones, just for money.

In the case of Carla Jean, although she listens along to what Llewelyn tells her he is up to and where he instructs her to run off to in order to protect herself, she is also shown as an independent woman with a mind of her own. After she met with Sheriff Bell and got off the phone with Llewelyn, she called Sheriff Bell to speak with him again and told him where Llewelyn would be – for his safety and to protect him – despite Llewelyn telling her not to speak with anyone regarding his plans especially since he had stolen money and was being chased. In traditional Westerns – and even to present day – women are often viewed as submissive and expected to listen to what they are told. Carla Jean defied the stereotype and did what she thought was right. Further showing her independence – or whatever was left of it due to Llewelyn putting her in a situation of losing her life – Carla Jean refuses to play into Chigurh's sick and absurd coin toss game, also referred to by Tyrer and Nickell. They wrote, "Later Moss' wife, Carla Jean, refuses to call the coin toss, and presumably dies, as the fulfillment of a promise that Chigurh had made with her now-dead husband...Chigurh offers Carla Jean a chance when he confronts her in her own bedroom, coldly explaining to her that her husband had a chance to save her and failed to take it...She slowly accepts her fate, instinctively recognizing the evil that her husband completely ignored and that the gas station owner Chigurh had menaced earlier could not comprehend," (91). Carla Jean's refusal to play into – or continue playing into – insanity in turn shows her sanity in comparison to all the men she is surrounded by in the film, furthering the Coen brothers' aim or 'ends' of showing sensible women trapped in situations created by hysterical and insecure toxic masculinity.

In *True Grit*, Mattie is shown as a young 14-year-old girl who is overly independent and determined to seek revenge on the man who killed her father. She is surrounded by many men to whom she seeks help from, but ultimately realizing that the only way this job could get done is if she was directly involved. Independence in female characters is something that the Coen brothers implement often, but *True Grit* is the first time that independence is bestowed on an underage teenage girl in old Western times looking to kill a man because he killed her father. Due to her age and being a girl, Mattie is not taken seriously by any of the men she encounters, even Cogburn and LeBeouf – until later on in the film. However, Mattie is the most independent and strong female character the Coens had implemented into their films – other than Marge in *Fargo* which was a step toward a fully independent woman but not quite as commanding as Mattie – which shows the versatility in female character archetypes that the Coen brothers employ in their art as auteurs. In Allen H. Redmon's chapter “‘I Haven’t Done Anything Funny’ Scrutinizing Gender in the Coens’ Arrangements of a Bunch of Men around One Woman”, he also explains Mattie's character in *True Grit* as having a strong grip on how the audience views her and the men around her. He explains, “What the audience is not given is unequivocal freedom to measure the men according to their own terms. Mattie's assessments are too central and too forceful to ignore...quite easily accept her view as the right view...The men are what she says they are until she says they are something else...Only when she reconsiders her assessment of Cogburn and then LeBeouf following the marshal's drunkenness does the audience realize any space to adjust their view of him...Mattie continues her appraisal of the men she encounters, and the audience is sure to at least consider her view as the authoritative opinion,” (124). Mattie is also shown, at the end of the movie, to be a grown single woman who chose to be unmarried. In

traditional and Western culture, Mattie is shown as a character to have continued on with her overly independent personality and defy the mold of having to be married.

Toxic masculinity is shown in *No Country for Old Men* through Llewelyn Moss, as well as Carson Wells. Llewelyn Moss aligns straight with the Coens' signature of a seemingly normal man who falls too deep into the underworld without realizing how far in he's gotten. Through this, he stumbles upon a briefcase of \$2 million that he lusts for and takes with him, essentially wanting to be the "ultimo hombre" or last man standing as he says within the film. With this, he informs Carla Jean that what he's up to is quite "dumber than Hell" but he's going to do it anyway, and in turn ends up getting chased and risking his and Carla Jean's lives for the \$2 million he accidentally found. Along with this, when Chigurh tells Llewelyn that he's after his wife, he offers him a simple proposal: hand over the money and your wife is safe. However, as explained through the analysis of women in Coen films and how they get caught in the aftermath of insane men, in traditional insane and hysterical man fashion, Llewelyn essentially puts the money before Carla Jean and gets in over his head thinking he can beat Chigurh – after already being warned by Carson Wells. Chigurh receives no money, therefore Carla Jean dies. Typical of toxic masculinity and how Llewelyn's ego got the best of him, letting him think that he can outsmart the serial murderer. Through the character of Carson Wells, toxic masculinity is shown by him warning Llewelyn of Chigurh's danger but believing that he, himself, can slip though Chigurh's fingers – but ends up dead. In *True Grit*, toxic masculinity is shown when LeBeouf spanks Mattie due to being frustrated by her not obeying him and having a mind of her own. Further, it is shown through Cogburn and LeBeouf having what was essentially a showdown to determine who the most masculine man was. As Martin Holtz states in *Economics of Justice in True Grit*, "Both Rooster and LaBeouf spend a considerable amount of time waxing eloquent

about their professional skills while doing little to turn their bragging into action," (44). The Coens' implementation of various female archetypes in their films all come back to one of their central and signature themes of absurdist noir comedy depicted through uncontrollable men.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, women are often subjected to objectification and abuse in all forms in real-life society and its sick reality has infiltrated the mistreatment and misconception of women in the media and entertainment. In Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, she explains, "So persistent is the fear of the powerful woman—the demonized feminist, the she-monster who proliferates in decades of significant progress by women—that it must reflect a deep-seated taboo against combining the awesome biological power of motherhood with status outside the home," (xix). Perfectly described, in other words, toxic masculinity that continues to permeate into our society and depictions of our society in entertainment despite the progress of powerful women for forging the path forward. The 'ends' or aims of the Coen brothers as film auteurs with the implementation of different kinds of women in their art is to show how regardless of what archetype a woman may fall into, she is sensible and sane to her core, in opposition to the various of archetypes men fall into in Coen films that show them all being hysterical and insecure to their core – the duplicity of a human from sane to insane, respectively woman to man; men in their films (and society) will always be hysterical while women in their films (and society) will always be sensible.