

MORALITY AND EXISTENTIALISM IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED* AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN* ACCORDING TO PRINCIPLES BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE<sup>1</sup>

MORALIDADE E EXISTENCIALISMO EM *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*, DE TIM O'BRIEN, E *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*, DE CORMAC MCCARTHY, DE ACORDO COM PRINCÍPIOS DE JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

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**ABSTRACT:** In literature, as well as in philosophy, it is possible to find several examples of situations in which a human being's moral standards are challenged. Be it because they opted for protecting themselves and their families, or for defending an ideal, we find fictional characters uttering discourses of regret towards an attitude or towards something they could have done. In addition, there are frequent debates about the responsibility of someone for their choice. In this article, we will analyse how Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas, to be found in his text *Existentialism is a humanism*, could guide a discussion on the behavior of characters in Cormac McCarthy's *No country for old men* and Tim O'Brien's *The things they carried*.

**Keywords:** Morality. Existentialism. Responsibility.

**RESUMO:** Na literatura, assim como na filosofia, é possível encontrar inúmeros exemplos de situações em que a moral de um ser humano é desafiada. Seja por terem optado por proteger a si mesmos e suas famílias, ou defender algum ideal, encontramos personagens literárias proferindo discursos de arrependimento por uma atitude tomada ou por algo que deixaram de fazer. Além disso, são frequentes os debates a respeito da responsabilidade de alguém sobre suas escolhas. Neste artigo, analisaremos como as ideias de Jean-Paul Sartre, contidas em seu texto *Existentialism is a humanism*, poderiam guiar uma discussão sobre o comportamento de personagens em *No country for old men*, de Cormac McCarthy, e *The things they carried*, de Tim O'Brien.

**Palavras-chave:** Moralidade. Existencialismo. Responsabilidade.

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## INTRODUCTION

*In life, man commits himself and draws his own portrait,  
outside of which there is nothing.*

(Jean-Paul Sartre)

Literary characters in war and western narratives frequently face moral challenges. They feel the necessity to protect themselves as well as their family and loved ones, and this sometimes demands killing, hurting others or breaking laws. Narratives of war, as well as so-called western narratives, often portray speeches of characters who say they regret doing something in the past, or regret not having done it. In this article, we intend to analyse how Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas in *Existentialism is a humanism* could be the framework for discussing and comparing the behavior of the characters Anton Chigurh in Cormac McCarthy's *No country for old men* and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross in Tim O'Brien's *The things they carried*.

Sartre is certainly one of the most vocal representatives of philosophical thought during the second half of the 20th century. One of the most noticeable aspects of the French philosopher's trajectory in the field is his dedication to theorize Existentialism and to defend freedom from social constructs. In *Existentialism is a humanism*, the French philosopher discusses his thoughts on morality, his point of departure being subjectivity, once he considers "existence precedes essence (...)" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 20). For Sartre, man defines himself through his actions, being responsible for the choices he makes.

Sartre also denies the existence of signs, for it is man who decides what he considers a sign and what this sign means. The philosopher considers that "[n]o general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 33), that is, the best choice will strongly depend upon the situation thereof. However, he differentiates acting in bad faith and in good faith: "(...) any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith", in opposition to the man who operates in good faith, who would have freedom for himself and for others as his main desire (p. 47).

Basing ourselves on these concepts, this article is organized in three distinct sections and a Conclusion. In the first section, entitled *Sartre's thoughts on morality*, we make an outline of the main ideas discussed in *Existentialism is a humanism*. This way, we are able to establish the criteria to be used as we analyse the characters Anton Chigurh in Cormac McCarthy's *No country for old men* and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross in Tim O'Brien's *The things they carried*.



In the second section, we discuss O'Brien's work focusing on the character Jimmy Cross. The narrative is a description of the events that took place during the narrator's experience as a soldier in the Vietnam War, and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is among the characters he mentions the most. After allowing his soldiers to sleep in a dangerous place, Cross blames himself for the death of one of them. In this section, we analyse the way Cross reacts to this situation based on Sartre's concepts of responsibility and of acting in good faith.

Finally, in the third section, we analyse McCarthy's work focusing on the character Anton Chigurh. The narrative is set in West Texas, in 1980, when a hunter decides to take the money he finds in a crime scene. This puts the man in danger in the hands of Chigurh, who constantly justifies his actions based on deterministic arguments and coin tosses. The narrative promotes a reflection on violence and its impacts, as well as choices and their incomes. Therefore, in this section we analyse Chigurh's conduct in relation to Sartre's ideas on morality.

Following this reasoning, we aim to compare the way the two characters justify their actions. We intend to demonstrate how differently an action can be interpreted when the person's justification of it is considered, and how the concepts discussed by Sartre serve as a basis for this judgement.

## SARTRE'S THOUGHTS ON MORALITY

Basing ourselves on the text *Existentialism is a humanism*, we can briefly define Sartre's thoughts on morality. The French philosopher affirms that one of the aspects that could frighten some critics regarding Existentialism is that "it offers man the possibility of individual choice (...)" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 19-20). This would be caused by the idea that "existence precedes essence (...)" (p. 20), being subjectivity the point of departure of the doctrine. With this idea, Sartre means "that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself" (p. 22), which is something done through his actions. Thus, "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (p. 22), and Sartre defines this as the first principle of Existentialism.

For Sartre, there is no such a thing as human nature. Men are defined by the era in which they live, and each era evolves according to certain dialectical laws. Given that information, it would be possible to state that we are not able to find in every man any "universal essence", but there is a "universal human *condition*" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 42, emphasis in the original). According to the French author, universality exists, but it is in constant construction. Existentialists would find it necessary to analyse conditions that can lead to a particular action or



individual intention: they would assert the existence of a situation that would be “the combination of very physical and psychoanalytical conditions which, in a given era, accurately define a set” (p. 70).

Furthermore, departing from the principle that human existence precedes its essence, man becomes responsible for what he is, and this is the first effect of Existentialism. Man becomes what he chooses to be and, even if he decides not to choose, “that still constitutes a choice. (...). Whatever he does, he cannot avoid bearing full responsibility for his situation” (SARTRE, 2007, p. 44-45). Accordingly, man has then to deal with having no excuses for his behavior, since he cannot attribute his actions to a human nature: “In other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. (...). That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (p. 29). It is freedom for making any decision one aims to make, but not freedom from responsibility for one’s choices.

Explaining his statements on responsibility, Sartre adds: “Existentialists do not believe in the power of passion. They will never regard a great passion as a devastating torrent that inevitably compels man to commit certain acts and which, therefore, is an excuse. They think that man is responsible for his own passion” (SARTRE, 2007, p. 29). He then highlights the Catholic belief in signs as justification for their actions and why Existentialism does not consider that either: “Neither do existentialists believe that man can find refuge in some given sign that will guide him on earth; they think that man interprets the sign as he pleases and that man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man” (p. 29). To make it clearer, he uses the example of Abraham:

(...) an angel orders Abraham to sacrifice his son. This would be okay provided it is really an angel who appears to him and says, ‘Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son.’ But any sane person may wonder first whether it is truly an angel, and second, whether I am really Abraham. What proof do I have? (...) if a voice speaks to me, it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel; if I regard a certain course of action as good, it is I who will choose to say that it is good, rather than bad. (SARTRE, 2007, p. 26)

Thus, it would be Abraham’s decision to trust the message he received, being entirely responsible for the choices and actions he would have made. A man may believe there are signs, but it is he who decides that those signs mean something. However, Sartre reminds the reader that Existentialism is not atheism; it is not trying to refute the existence of God:



(...) rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference – that is our point of view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God. (SARTRE, 2007, p. 53-54)

He claims, then, that even if one believes in the existence of God, he is still responsible for this belief and the actions that were caused by it.

As another example of man's freedom of choice, the French philosopher narrates a case of one of his students that had sought him out for help with a decision he needed to make. He defines the student's situation as "vacillating between two kinds of morality: a morality motivated by sympathy and individual devotion, and another morality with a broader scope, but less likely to be fruitful" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 31), to which he states no code of ethics could determine *a priori* what the student should do. For him, "principles that are too abstract fail to define action" (p. 49). In practical terms, Sartre affirms he could have given the student some advice. However, "since his goal was freedom, I wanted him to be free to decide" (p. 72). Therefore, the professor's answer was: "You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world" (p. 33). Clarifying his example, Sartre points out that choosing someone as an adviser is another way of committing yourself to your own decisions, since, if you choose to consult a priest, for example, you already know more or less what sort of advice he will give you. So, in seeking his professor out, the student already knew the answer he would get.

Furthermore, about the ineffectiveness of a code of ethics in determining the actions of someone, the author exemplifies his idea with the situation of an artist painting on a canvas: "As we all know, there are no aesthetic values *a priori*, but there are values that will subsequently be reflected in the coherence of the painting, in the relationship between the will to create and the finished work" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 45-46). Accordingly:

What art and morality have in common is creation and invention. We cannot decide *a priori* what ought to be done. (...). Man makes himself; he does not come into the world fully made, he makes himself by choosing his own morality, and his



circumstances are such that he has no option other than to choose a morality. (SARTRE, 2007, p. 46)

Thus, going back to the student's dilemma, some values may be reflected by the decision he makes, but he has to invent his morality.

With all those assumptions about the choices different people might make, Sartre mentions having heard he was not supposed to judge others, to which he answers:

In one sense this is true, in another not. It is true in the sense that whenever man chooses his commitment and his project in a totally sincere and lucid way, it is impossible for him to prefer another. It is also true in the sense that we do not believe in the idea of progress. Progress implies improvement, but man is always the same, confronting a situation that is forever changing, while choice always remains a choice in any situation. (SARTRE, 2007, p. 47)

However, he acknowledges the possibility that some choices are based on error and some on truth. Taking this notion on the background of choices, the existentialist philosopher conceptualizes acting in bad faith and acting in good faith:

If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith. (...). I do not pass moral judgement against him, but I call his bad faith an error. (SARTRE, 2007, p. 47)

According to Sartre, the man of good faith would have as his main desire freedom for himself as well as for the others. This way, he would be basing his decisions on truth, in opposition to the man of bad faith. Once man realizes he is the one supposed to impose values, he can only wish freedom as the foundation of all those values.



## TIM O'BRIEN'S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*

After this brief definition of Sartre's ideas on morality and freedom of choice, we have a fairly comprehensive outline in order to interpret the actions of two representative characters in the novels *The things they carried*, by Tim O'Brien, and *No country for old men*, by Cormac McCarthy. In *The things they carried*, the eponymous narrator describes events that occurred during his experience as a soldier in the Vietnam War. He recounts the issues of his fellow soldiers and himself while dealing with the reality of war, death, and the memories of what they had left in their respective hometowns. Among the characters he mentions the most are the soldiers Kiowa and Ted Lavender and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. Cross guides the group in which O'Brien is and ends up blaming himself for the death of two of his soldiers.

In the first chapter, *The things they carried*, Cross is described as the man who carried, besides his ammunition, a very significant load:

As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45-caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men. (O'BRIEN, 2009)

And this responsibility has an even heavier toll when O'Brien lets the reader know Cross is twenty-four years old and has never aspired to a career in the military. He is young and in love, as many of the other boys he is responsible for:

Lieutenant Cross gazed at the tunnel. But he was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore. They were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue. He was smiling. Vaguely, he was aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen paddies, yet he could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn't help it. (O'BRIEN, 2009)

As a lieutenant, Jimmy Cross feels guilty for having let one of his soldiers die in consequence of a choice he made. One night, after walking a long way, Cross told his men to camp on the patch they were supposed to, according to higher authorities, even though the soldiers did not think it seemed like a good ground to



sleep on. After trying to sleep, they began to drown in muck, and discovered there was a village nearby and this was the place where the villagers threw their waste, including excrements. One of the soldiers, Kiowa, died being swallowed by the muck and Cross feels he made a fatal mistake letting his men sleep on a dangerous riverbank.

According to Sartre, there would not be a code of conduct saying to Lieutenant Jimmy Cross what he had to do, since moral behavior depends on the situation. The existentialist philosopher even gave an example about a military leader in *Existentialism is a humanism*:

For example, when a military leader takes it upon himself to launch an attack and sends a number of men to their deaths, he chooses to do so, and, ultimately, makes that choice alone. Some orders may come from his superiors, but their scope is so broad that he is obliged to interpret them, and it is on his interpretation that the lives of ten, fourteen, or twenty men depend. In making such a decision, he is bound to feel some anguish. All leaders have experienced that anguish, but it does not prevent them from acting. To the contrary, it is the very condition of their action, for they first contemplate several options, and, choosing one of them, realize that its only value lies in the fact that it was chosen. (SARTRE, 2007, p. 27)

Thus, Cross has a reason to feel guilty, because he could have delayed camping in order to find a better site, although having been told to stop at that place. However, we cannot say Cross acted in bad faith, since he does not appear to have used his passions as an excuse for his actions, he only happened to make a mistake. On the contrary of a man that acts in bad faith, Cross admits there are no excuses and he is the one to blame for his mistake:

When a man died, there had to be blame. Jimmy Cross understood this. You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl





Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote.

In the field, though, the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever. (O'BRIEN, 2009)

Cross recognizes the mistake he made had fatal consequences, and refuses to put the blame on somebody else. He admits Kiowa was his responsibility and that every choice he makes reflects directly in the future of the soldiers who obey him. Therefore, he fits into Sartre's category of a man who acts in good faith.

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is seen regretting another of his attitudes during the novel, which is being distracted in the moment Ted Lavender was shot. Cross was thinking about his college crush Martha, and feels guilty for Lavender's death, since the lieutenant believes he would have been able to save the soldier had he been paying enough attention to his job:

Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself. (...). He pictured Martha's smooth young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her. (O'BRIEN, 2009)

We could say Cross has left his duty aside to think about his passions. However, according to Sartre's logic, a man acts in bad faith when he uses his passions to justify his actions, which is something Cross did not do. On the opposite side, Cross does not feel his attitude was justifiable. He feels responsible for what happened to Lavender and that even leads to a change in the way he deals with his love for Martha:

On the morning after Ted Lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned Martha's letters. Then he burned the two photographs.

(...)

He realized it was only a gesture. Stupid, he thought. Sentimental, too, but mostly just stupid.

Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame. (O'BRIEN, 2009)



According to the French author's concepts, we could even affirm he was in anguish, a feeling defined as "the total absence of justification accompanied, at the same time, by responsibility toward all" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 55). Cross could not reasonably justify his error, but he still had responsibility towards the life of Lavender and all the other soldiers under his commandment. Accessing his thoughts through the narrative, we could classify Lieutenant Jimmy Cross as a man who acts in good faith, according to Sartre's tenets.

Moral analyses like this one are long and controversial and could lead to several questions, but, as the narrator tells us in the chapter entitled *How to tell a true war story*, "[a] true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done" (O'BRIEN, 2009). The eponymous narrator does not claim his story to be morally correct. However, following Sartre's reasoning, due to the very existence of characters such as Jimmy Cross, the narrative would not be considered entirely amoral either.

## CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*

In addition to the aspects already described, we should keep in mind that Sartre also attributes the concept of acting in bad faith to men who fabricate a deterministic argument. This is a strong trait of Anton Chigurh, a character in McCarthy's *No country for old men*. The story is set in 1980, in West Texas near the US-Mexico border, where a hunter called Llewelyn Moss lives in a trailer with his wife, Carla Jean. In one of his hunts, Moss discovers the site where some drug dealers appear to have killed each other, leaving a bag with two million dollars, which he decides to take. This puts him in danger in the hands of some people searching for the money, including Carson Wells, hired by the owner of the money to go after the thief; and Anton Chigurh, a mysterious and extremely dangerous character whose motivations nobody seems to understand. The narrative is embedded with letters from Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, who oversees the investigation while reflecting on the enormous amount of violence time has brought to the town he was so used to.

Chigurh is a character with whom the reader first has a contact through the trail of murders he leaves behind and through the little he speaks. In addition, the narrative presents dialogues between other characters that describe Chigurh from their points of view, which makes this man appear even more mysterious and dangerous. For example, when Carson Wells warns Moss about who is coming for him:

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Do you know who the man is who shot you?

Maybe he didnt shoot me. Maybe it was one of the Mexicans<sup>4</sup>.

Do you know who the man is?

No. Am I supposed to?

Because he's not somebody you really want to know. The people he meets tend to have very short futures. Nonexistent, in fact.

Well good for him.

You're not listening. You need to pay attention. This man wont stop looking for you. Even if he gets the money back. It wont make any difference to him. Even if you went to him and gave him the money he would still kill you. Just for having inconvenienced him. (MCCARTHY, 2006)

Though Moss still thinks he is capable of escaping Chigurh, Wells makes it clear he is not the type of person one can consider he would ever escape from:

You cant make a deal with him. Let me say it again. Even if you gave him the money he'd still kill you. There's no one alive on this planet that's ever had even a cross word with him. They're all dead. These are not good odds. He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that. (MCCARTHY, 2006)

Anton Chigurh is described as someone who does not hesitate to kill anyone that crosses his way in order to achieve his goal. His weapon of choice is a high pressure air pistol, not leaving bullets behind or making any noise. He is impossible to make a deal with and bases his decisions on his own set of principles, which none of the other characters seem to understand.

Chigurh solves the matter of killing or letting a person live upon a coin toss, an object that he believes was already made to be there deciding that

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<sup>4</sup> Cormac McCarthy's *No country for old men* presents several instances of oral expression. This is the reason for some misspellings in the literary quotes.



person's future. In *Part II*, having stopped in a gas station, he asks the proprietor to call heads or tails:

Call it?

Yes.

For what?

Just call it.

Well I need to know what it is we're callin here.

How would that change anything?

(...)

I didnt put nothin up.

Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didnt know it. (MCCARTHY, 2006)

Chigurh asks then if he knows the date on the coin that was just tossed, to what the man says "no", and Chigurh answers "It's nineteen fifty-eight. It's been travelling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it" (MCCARTHY, 2006). The proprietor wins the game, and Chigurh leaves the station saying the man must keep that coin as his lucky coin.

In addition, Chigurh's method of killing includes claiming he has no say in the matter; there is no way people can change their fate. In *Part IX*, he goes after Carla Jean to kill her claiming that it was a promise to her husband, Llewelyn Moss, whom he had killed before:

You've got no cause to hurt me, she said.

I know. But I gave my word.

Your word?

Yes. We're at the mercy of the dead here. In this case your husband.

(...)

You give your word to my husband to kill me?

Yes.

He's dead. My husband is dead.



Yes. But I'm not.

You don't owe nothin' to dead people.

Chigurh cocked his head slightly. No? he said.

How can you?

How can you not?

They're dead.

Yes. But my word is not dead. Nothing can change that.  
(MCCARTHY, 2006)

Chigurh argues that what happened cannot be reversed, Carla's husband had the opportunity to take her out of danger and he chose not to do it. He adds it was not Carla's fault, "It was bad luck" (MCCARTHY, 2006). The best he can do is then to give her the chance of a coin toss. Carla loses, and says: "You make it like it was the coin. But you're the one" (MCCARTHY, 2006). Chigurh insists it is not his choice:

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (MCCARTHY, 2006)

And he completes:

When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. (MCCARTHY, 2006)

Following Sartre's thoughts on moral behavior, we would never be able to agree with Chigurh's justification for his actions. According to the French philosopher, men are totally responsible for what they do and, by fabricating a deterministic

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theory, such as the one Chigurh uses to justify himself, one is acting in bad faith. In Sartre's logic, we would agree with Carla Jean's claims. Chigurh is the one deciding who is living and who is dying. According to the concepts exposed in *Existentialism is a humanism*, even when Chigurh says the coin traveled years to be where it is and solve the matter, he was the one who chose to interpret the coin as a sign for choosing a certain attitude.

In addition to that, Sartre affirms that the idea of subjectivity that Existentialism proposes means "man has more dignity than a stone or a table" (SARTRE, 2007, p. 23). In other words, it means "that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so. Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower" (p. 23), or, we may even say, unlike that of a coin. A coin cannot make choices, but Chigurh, as a human being, has the subjectivity to choose. At the end, the choice is always his. Following Sartre's reasoning, Chigurh justifies his actions using a deterministic logic and attributing value to the objects he chooses as signs. Therefore, he acts in bad faith.

## CONCLUSION

Through the examples of O'Brien's and McCarthy's novels, we are able to discuss a case in which Sartre's moral principles would be favorable to a character's actions, as well as one in which they would not. The theory is hence consistent. The different results happen because Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and Anton Chigurh are remarkably different characters. Cross is always self-conscious about his actions. He tries to do what is best for the soldiers under his commandment and feels entirely responsible for the consequences they face. Although making some mistakes, the lieutenant is in accord with Sartre's view of a man of good faith, being a man who admits his responsibility for his own choices. Chigurh, on the other hand, fabricates the deterministic argument that Sartre classifies as produced by men of bad faith. He causes harm to others without admitting to have the responsibility for it and uses the coin toss as a sign that he interprets as the final answer to whether someone must live or die. As Sartre would put it, there are no signs in essence. We can interpret the things we see and feel the way we choose. Even though, for Sartre, every decision in the novels would be a new situation to which we would not have a code of conduct saying *a priori* what the character ought to do, one aspect is clear: each one of those men is always fully responsible for the choices they have made.



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