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No Country for Young Rappers: The Similarities Between Lewellyn Moss and Kendrick Lamar

Kyle Schwartz

The 1980's West Texas desert and Los Angeles's Compton projects may be more similar than many think. With drugs running the deserts and the streets, murders are not uncommon, and greed is inevitable. Money and drugs tend to block judgement and encourage crime in places where the drug trade runs heavily. In the Cohen brother's movie, *No Country for Old Men*, Lewellyn Moss acts off greed to keep his newfound riches. Similarly, rap artist Kendrick Lamar raps about doing what it takes to break the poverty cycle and leave the projects. Whether it is a movie about wild West Texas or an album about Compton, LA, *No Country for Old Men's* Lewellyn Moss and Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* show how the race for riches leaves no winners.

Some people may live the majority of their lives without being labeled a criminal, but it only takes one life choice for that to change. In Lewellyn Moss's first scene of *No Country for Old Men*, Lewellyn Moss is hunting antelope in the desert. Moss hunts for sport and is interrupted by the sight of blood belonging to something other than the deer he shot (7:08). After stumbling upon a drug deal gone wrong, Lewellyn Moss knows exactly what he may find: money. In the first verse of Kendrick Lamar's "Money Trees," Lamar tells how rapping is the "only thing that frees his mind," then continues to say, "Then freeze that verse when we see dollar signs" (Lamar). Moss and Lamar both freeze what they do for leisure in order to chase money. Both men are distracted from what makes them feel free when they come across an illegal opportunity to make money. Lewellyn comes across many dead or almost dead drug traffickers and eventually finds a satchel containing \$2.4 million in cash. When he goes home to his trailer park, he tells his wife, Carla Jean, the satchel is full of money to which she responds, "That would be the day" (14:44). This shows right away that Lewellyn and Carla Jean are living a low-class lifestyle and have not had riches like this before. Also in the first verse, Lamar talks of growing up having "Dreams of livin' life like rappers do" (Lamar). Growing up in Compton, it was many

young man's dream to someday leave the projects and be successful. For Lamar, this meant living the high dollar life like Eazy-E and E-40 who rapped about luxurious lifestyles. While Moss and Lamar grew up in very different places, the desire to leave the poverty cycle was no different. The small towns of West Texas were becoming increasingly dangerous. *No Country for Old Men* begins with Sheriff Bell talking of the more heinous crimes being committed and says, "The crime you see now, it's even hard to take its measure" (2:12). Whether the crimes were in Texas or Los Angeles, they all had something in common: greed.

Most criminals commit crimes on the idea that they will get away with it. At the first sign of danger, Moss flees his home and sends Carla Jean to her mother's house (25:42). At this point, Moss decides he will do whatever necessary to protect his millions, even if it means turning his entire life around and leaving his home with nothing more than Carla Jean or what he can carry. This is the point when Moss decides to risk it all for the money. The final line in verse one of "Money Trees" states "Go at a reverend for the revenue" (Lamar). This simply means Lamar possesses a "by any means necessary" mindset when it comes to money, no matter how respected or innocent the victim is. Greed ignores all sets of moral standards and any idea of good versus evil. In both cases, the criminal understands and acknowledges wrongdoing. As Moss is telling Carla Jean to pack her things, he says, "At what point would you quit bothering to look for your two million dollars?" (26:05). Moss understands that he is about to be living on the run from the law and the drug ring, however the reward, to Moss, is far greater than the possibility of punishment. Whatever choice is made in this moment will affect the rest of Moss's life. Similarly, Lamar sings, "It go Halle Barry or hallelujah, pick your poison tell me what you doin'" (Lamar). A choice is almost always giving between "hallelujah"-the good- or "Halle Barry" being the crime that is taking place. These decisions are usually made quickly with little time to spare and must be acknowledged. Neither crime nor the law will wait on the decision. No matter how different the setting, people have the ultimate choice between good and wrongdoing, but the idea of wealth usually sits on the wrong shoulder.

The power of wealth can quickly turn one from ethical to unethical and blind one's original beliefs. However, these unethical choices are sometimes necessary in underprivileged areas as tradition methods of wealth are unavailable. Lewellyn Moss puts Carla Jean and his own life at risk all for a bag of cash. While he previously may have never thought of turning their worlds upside down, Moss now realizes, at least to some degree, the implications of his decision as he tells Carla Jean, "Things happen... Come on I can't take them back" (26:11). When choosing between Halle Barry or hallelujah, Moss chose Halle Barry and has no way of turning back. Blinded by a couple million dollars, Moss is willing to risk his whole life. Explaining

this effect that wealth has on the poor, Lamar says, “A dollar just might make that lane switch” (Lamar). To Kendrick Lamar, the lane switch is from spiritual to selfish, or from making money honorably to robbing the weak. This does not always have to be for a couple million dollars; large crimes are continuously committed for seemingly small rewards. The rewards though, can seem ever so enticing. Before Lamar was famous, he was enticed to commit many small crimes in order to get by. Lamar recognizes that the desire for wealth or even opportunity for wealth can change one’s logical reasoning, just as it did to Lewellyn Moss.

While some may stop at one criminal act, it is more than likely that one crime will lead to another, like one lie. Eventually, Lewellyn Moss ends up hunted, shot at, and severely injured. After a shootout between Moss and notorious hitman Anton Chigurh, Moss stumbles across the U.S.-Mexico border, leaving his riches where only he knows. So far, Moss has created more trouble for himself than two million dollars could ever fix; he has a target on his back. Through all of this trouble though, Moss still believes his money can save him. His life has never been more at risk, however a single satchel shields Moss from the truth of inevitable death. Acknowledging this act of pursuit, Lamar says, “I been hustlin’ all day, this-a-way, that-a-way, through canals and alley ways” (Lamar). This line claims that there is constantly a chase for wealth and an inability to escape the chase once committed. The use of rhymes and repetition points to a cat and mouse chase through the darkest parts of the criminal world such as canals and alley ways. While Moss is chasing after wealth, he is also running from Chigurh, and Chigurh is chasing Moss in order to obtain the \$2.4 million-dollar satchel. Finally, Lamar still claims that “Money trees are the perfect place for shade” (Lamar). Even after all the challenges, Lamar still believes having immense wealth will shade him from hardships that the less fortunate must deal with. Ironically, those who do not criminally chase after wealth do not face nearly the same hardships that men like Lewellyn Moss must face. Although Lamar may feel safest under money trees, another *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* song is titled “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst.” This addresses his realization that while money trees may be the perfect place for shade, they can only momentarily lessen the need to be saved and are not the solution to all problems. Unfortunately, this is not something Lewellyn Moss realizes until it is too late. He always thought, that as long as he had the money, or knew where it was, then he could keep himself safe. It seems to some people, if not most, the thought of riches is blinding, almost as if it changes one’s entire personality, reality, and acceptance of unethical actions.

There are no winners in the criminal world; there are only those sitting comfortably under a money tree for the time being. Eventually, they die trying to grow this tree or walk out into the sun to face reality. Lewellyn Moss only saw the money tree in the far distance; he was never able to enjoy

the shade, even for a minute. Moss died trying to secure his position and died in the hot sun of Texas. Kendrick Lamar saw the cruelty of the money tree but could not help but to be drawn towards it as he grew up living in the projects of Los Angeles. Does greed turn the unstable into criminals? Do criminals always have a choice? Maybe we are all just good kids growing up in a mad city.

Works Cited

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