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At Least It's An Ethos

At first glance, Raymond Chandler's smooth-talking Philip Marlowe may seem to be a far cry from *The Big Lebowski's* blathering Dude, but these two detectives are actually one and the same. Although the Dude's free-spirited, drug-induced philosophizing may differ from Marlowe's square, logical reasoning, in the end, they do have the same force on society. Philip Marlowe and the Dude are representations of America's better self. Their roles as counterculture figures show an improved version of America, outside the mainstream. To frame this comparison and show their counterculture tendencies, we're going to look at the film, *The Big Lebowski* and the novel, *The Long Goodbye*. Within these two works we will see, not only the similarities between the two, but also how their roles as heroes personify a better America.

Let's first establish how Marlowe and the Dude are the same detective, separated by half a century. Each story takes place in the less-than-perfect City of Angels, Los Angeles. Ethan and Joel Coen, who wrote and directed *The Big Lebowski* have not kept it a secret that Chandler was an inspiration for the film. In fact, Ethan comes right out and states, "For us it was above and beyond all else a California story. We even drew loose inspiration from a Chandler plot outline. All his novels, or almost all, are situated in Los Angeles" (Tyree 51). In *The Long Goodbye*, we see Marlowe moving around L.A., from Laurel Canyon to Idle Valley to Sepulveda Canyon. Likewise, we see the Dude dropping off the money by driving north on 405, getting off on Simi Valley Road and later going to visit Larry Sellers in "North Hollywood, on Radford. Near the In-N-

Out Burger” (*Lebowski*). We also have the Dude going to the pornographer Jackie Treehorn’s party in Malibu, which becomes *The Big Lebowski*’s version of Idle Valley.

Next let’s look at their relationships with women. Neither seem all that interested in pursuing a relationship with any woman in the book nor in the film, but both will get momentarily distracted by a blonde. When Marlowe first sees Eileen Wade in a bar, he describes her as otherworldly. “The dream across the way was none of these, not even of that kind of world. She was unclassifiable, as remote and clear as mountain water, as elusive as its color” (*Goodbye* 90). Later, she comes on to Marlowe, which he describes as “murder” and says, “You don’t get that sort of invitation from that sort of woman very often anywhere (*Goodbye* 213). One could say that the Dude gets just that invitation from Bunny, the Big Lebowski’s wife when he comes across her sunbathing by her pool. She is painting her toenails and asks the Dude to blow on them, then continues to proposition him: “I’ll suck your cock for a thousand dollars” (*Lebowski*). Luckily, both our detectives come to their senses in time and do not get entangled with these dangerous blondes. As for other affairs, both Marlowe and the Dude have semi-serious flings with somewhat powerful women, who also happen to be the daughters of their foils. At the end of *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe ends up sleeping with Linda Loring, Harlan Potter’s daughter, whom he describes upon first meeting as having a jade cigarette holder, emerald earrings, emerald lapel pin and an emerald ring (*Goodbye* 161-162). The Dude ends up sleeping with Maude, the Big Lebowski’s daughter, who wears a long dark green robe throughout the movie. Linda Loring jokes with Marlowe about flying to Paris and getting married, but really is not serious about their relationship, and Maude only wants

the Dude for his sperm, explaining to him that she doesn't want him involved in her or the child's life.

There are also many small details that Marlowe and the Dude share. While Marlowe is rarely seen without a cigarette stuck to his lip or in his hands, the Dude is often in the process of rolling a joint or smoking a roach throughout the majority of the movie. Each also has a drink of choice that the reader or the viewer cannot help but notice. Just as it's almost impossible to not want to drink gimlets while reading *The Long Goodbye*, so too will the viewer of *The Big Lebowski* find himself craving a White Russian. And while both detectives are men of many words, neither is particularly physical. Each would prefer that their talking do the job, rather than their fists. This does not mean, however, that they are immune to fights, as both men get roughed up quite a bit by their various assailants. And finally worth mentioning, is their affinity and observations of interior design. Whether it's a description of the sterility of his jail cell, the ugliness of the waiting room at the Carne Organization, or the gaudiness of Harlan Potter's mansion, Marlowe can't seem to get enough of explaining the spaces around him. When he walks into a room, the reader is given an exact, detailed description of each piece of furniture, the color of the walls and the print on the rug. Color and patterns are often mentioned and repeated throughout the novel. So too, we see an ongoing theme of interior design in *The Big Lebowski*, as the main story seems to orbit around the Dude's rug. At the beginning of the movie, one of the thugs micturates on his rug, which the Dude repeatedly states, "really tied the room together" (*Lebowski*). As he goes along this trip of ins and outs, and as things become more and more complicated for him, he admits, before passing out, "All the Dude every wanted was his rug back" (*Lebowski*).

Also, when the Dude blacks out and the viewer is taken along for the ride on his acid flashbacks, which happen more than once in the film, images that appear in earlier scenes show up inside his mind. For instance, when he goes to visit Maude, there is a large painting of a pair of scissors on a red background that is visible behind the Dude. It is not mentioned, nor is it specifically important to the storyline. However, during a scene of unconsciousness, the Dude imagines three nihilists dressed in red chasing after him with huge scissors. We're shown that while the Dude may not point these things out to the audience, he is aware of his surroundings and observes the spaces around him.

Now that we've established that the Dude is a 1990s reincarnation of Marlowe, let's look specifically at their roles as counterculture forces and the ways in which they represent a better America. First of all, both operate outside the economy. Neither Marlowe nor the Dude have any personal possessions of their own. Marlowe lives in a rented house that is already furnished with someone else's belongings. "It was furnished, and it belonged to a woman who had gone to Idaho to live with her widowed daughter for a while. The rent was low, partly because the owner wanted to be able to come back on short notice, and partly because of the steps" (*Goodbye* 6). The Dude lives in an apartment with little furnishings besides his beloved carpet, and after a visit from his landlord, we get the feeling that he may not even pay rent.

MARTY Dude, uh tomorrow's already the tenth.
DUDE Far-out...oh...oh...alright...uh...ok.
MARTY Just...um...slip the rent under my door. (*Lebowski*)

Earlier, the Big Lebowski asks the Dude if he is employed and if he goes out looking for a job dressed like that on a weekday. The Dude responds with perplexity at the day of the week. From this exchange the audience gathers that the Dude is, in fact, unemployed.

During the duration of *The Long Goodbye*, it is estimated that Marlowe makes a total of \$25 total, excluding expenses. In the opening scene of *The Big Lebowski*, we see the Dude writing a check for sixty-nine cents in order to buy a carton of half-and-half creamer. It is not quite clear to the audience how it is possible that either Marlowe or the Dude can survive in an American society with little to no income, but we learn that this lack of money is a personal choice for each man.

Both detectives seem to have a complete lack of interest in money altogether. Although Marlowe can't seem to stop talking about his "Portrait of Madison," we never get the impression that he would actually spend it. In the end, he gives it back to Terry and ends up making almost no money from the case. At one point, Bernie Ohls points out Marlowe's peculiar lack of interest in money. "You were pretty helpful to those people and you didn't make a dime. You were pretty helpful to a guy named Lennox too, the way I hear it. And you didn't make a dime out that one either. What do you do for eating money, pal? You got a lot saved so you don't have to work any more?" (*Goodbye* 280). This same ambivalence is true for the Dude as well. Although he takes the job from the Big Lebowski and excitedly tells Walter about the money he will receive for doing the hand-off and supposedly getting Bunny back, we never actually think he will ever get the money, nor actually spend it. "Twenty grand, man! And, or course, I still get to keep the rug" (*Lebowski*). In fact, from this, we see that he is mostly concerned with the rug, not the actual money. And again, later on, while talking with Maude:

MAUDE Still, I hardly wish to make my father's embezzlement a police matter, so I'm proposing that you try to recover the money from the people you delivered it to.

DUDE Well, I could do that...

MAUDE If you successfully do so, I will compensate you to the tune of ten percent of the recovered sum.

DUDE A hundred...
MAUDE Thousand, yes. Bones or clams or whatever you call them.
DUDE Yeah...uh...but...but...uh...what about my...uh...
MAUDE Your rug. Yes, well, with that money you can buy any
 number of rugs that don't have sentimental value to me.
 (*Lebowski*)

Despite the fact that money is seemingly being offered to him left and right, he is more concerned about his rug than the cash. Another interesting point relating to his lack of interest in bones, or clams, is the fact that when the Big Lebowski gives him the briefcase filled with, supposedly, one million dollars, he never looks inside. There is never any indication that is it locked, but he never takes the minute to look inside to see if the money is there or what one million dollars looks like. Also, it is Walter that comes up with the plan to throw out a ringer for the actual briefcase in the hand-off, which the Dude does not want to go along with. The Dude does not want the million dollars. He is happy enough with the \$20,000 that the Big Lebowski said he would give him for dropping it off. And to further this point, when the briefcase gets stolen, along with his car, the Dude eventually just shrugs it off. On his way back from Maude's he's telling his limo driver, "I was feeling really shitty earlier in the day. I'd lost a little money, I was down in the dumps...fuck it! I can't be worrying about that shit. Life goes on!" (*Lebowski*). While one can say that both Marlowe and the Dude have many character flaws, they can never be accused of being greedy. This disinterest in money and possessions is a decidedly anti-American way of life. Neither of these men are influenced by the rampant commercialism that surrounds them in the streets of L.A., and both are living outside the mainstream.

Another characteristic of their role as counterculture forces is Marlowe's and the Dude's refusal to play the system. Near the beginning of *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe

gets taken downtown to talk to the police captain about what happened to Terry Lennox. Marlowe's snide sarcasm comes out as he's being booked into the city jail. The captain is taking note of Marlowe's physical features, and Marlowe compares himself to a show dog. "Much obliged, Captain. Thanks for the time. You forgot to have me open my mouth. I have some nice inlays and one very high-class porcelain jacket crown. Eighty-seven dollars worth of porcelain jacket crown. You forgot to look inside my nose too, Captain" (*Goodbye* 53). Similarly, the Dude has his own sarcastic jabs for the two men who break into his apartment and pee on his rug. One of the thugs is dunking the Dude's head into the toilet, demanding to know where the money is, and the Dude, says, between dunks, "Uh...um...it's down there somewhere. Let me take another look" (*Lebowski*). Both have the same smart-ass reactions to those that are trying to bully them. They could take the easy road and work with the system, but they won't. We see this stubbornness emerge again when the homicide skipper, Captain Gregarious, is questioning Marlowe. They're still trying to get Marlowe to talk about the whereabouts of Terry Lennox and their relationship, but Marlowe is stonewalling them.

Gregarious looked at me finally. "You can talk now. Make it snappy."

I didn't answer him. He leaned back and grinned. His hand went out slowly for his coffee cup and went around it. He leaned forward a little. The cup jerked but I beat it by going sideways out of the chair. I landed hard on my shoulder, rolled over and got up slowly. My hands were quite numb now. (*Goodbye* 45)

The Dude has a similar experience with the police chief of Malibu. After being drugged at Jackie Treehorn's party, the Dude is picked up by the Malibu police and taken to the station. The Dude is trying to explain that Jackie Treehorn is to blame for his condition and that he's of dubious character. The Malibu Police Chief tells the Dude:

Mr. Treehorn draws a lot of water in this town. You don't draw shit, Lebowski. Now we got a nice, quiet little beach community here, and I aim to keep it nice and quiet. So let me make something plain. I don't like you sucking around, bothering our citizens, Lebowski. I don't like your jerk-off name. I don't like your jerk-off face. I don't like your jerk-off behavior, and I don't like you, jerk-off. Do I make myself clear?
(*Lebowski*)

And what is the Dude's response to all of this? After a moment of dazed staring, the Dude says, "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening" (*Lebowski*). Immediately, the police chief throws his coffee mug at the Dude's forehead, gets up, and knocks him over in his chair. We can see in both these detectives, it's not just a lack of respect for authority; it's a willful rejection of any type of oppression from a larger system. They refuse to take part in American culture and society, which includes the penal and judicial systems. The Dude even goes so far as to reject seemingly all forms of the government or ruling structure by the mere fact that his only form of I.D. found on him was a Ralph's card. This indicates that he may not even have a driver's license, even though he somehow owns a car.

Their rejection of this ruling structure carries over into complete contempt of the wealthy and powerful elite. We can see this in Marlowe's relationship with Harlan Potter, and with the Dude's relationship with the Big Lebowski. Marlowe's initial description of Mr. Potter goes like this (although it doesn't have to be *only* Mr. Potter, as this characterizes all rich, powerful men for Marlowe):

Guys with a hundred million dollars live a peculiar life, behind a screen of servants, bodyguards, secretaries, lawyers, and tame executives. Presumably they eat, sleep, get their hair cut, and wear clothes. But you never know for sure. Everything you read or hear about them has been processed by a public relations gang of guys who are paid big money to create and maintain a usable personality, something simple and clean and sharp, like a sterilized needle. (*Goodbye*, 81)

We see this in the Dude's first encounter with the Big Lebowski as well. In fact, he first sees Mr. Lebowski not in person, but on his wall of achievements and awards, shown to him by the Big Lebowski's assistant, Brandt. There is already an impersonal figure presented before the Dude even gets to meet the man. In *The Brothers Grim*, Erica Rowell describes the Dude's first meeting with his nemesis: "His nonmaterialistic, zen-like gutters-or-strikes persona goes up against the fat-cat Lebowski, not even suspecting the old man has a reason to manipulate and lie" (Rowell 226). And in a particularly Dude-like moment, Marlowe comments on first meeting Mr. Potter by saying, "I don't know how it feels to be worth a hundred million or so, but he didn't look as if he was having any fun" (*Goodbye* 230). It's saying something that both these detectives' foils are part of the wealthy, ruling class. A class that they have no wish to be a part of. While it may be the American dream to aspire to riches and wealth and plenty, this is not the American dream for Marlowe or the Dude.

Now, how does this counterculture role represent a better version of America? As we've established, both the Dude and Marlowe are anti-consumer forces that refuse to play the American commercial system. They are both portrayed against the backdrop of "a depraved California full of pop art and commercialism but low on inspiration or meaning" (Rowell 217). Amidst this setting each detective tries, in his own way, to find meaning. There is a distinct split in American society between those that fall into the category of the typical American consumer who wishes to climb the capitalistic ladder in order to succeed, and those who reject the mass production of American culture and retain their individualism. In doing so, these anti-consumeristic individuals also retain a better sense of what truly matters in life. The counterculture has identified that America,

as an institution, has moved seemingly further and further from where it was “fifty years ago before the age of mass production” (*Goodbye* 235). As David Simmons points out in *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel*, “There is an essential tone of retrieval evident within the counterculture that believes that an ‘original’ positive American-ness has been lost through the (predominantly capitalist) ‘civilization’ of society” (Simmons 148). One can even say that through their hobbies, Marlowe and the Dude convey this belief of a better America. It doesn’t take the viewer long to realize that bowling is the Dude’s true passion. Many of the scenes take place in the bowling alley, and when they’re not there, the Dude and Walter are often discussing bowling. It is the standard American pastime. “It wouldn’t be far-fetched to suggest that in *Lebowski*, bowling seems to stand for the American dream of real friendship between people from different backgrounds and ethnicities, even if the point is disguised by absurdity” (Tyree 98). And what do we make of Marlowe’s obsession with chess? For this, we can look back to *The Book of the Morals of Men and the Duties of Nobles and Commoners, on the Game of Chess*, by Jacobus de Cessolis. This book from the Middle Ages tells the story of the evil king Evilmerodach and the philosopher, Philometer, who creates the game of chess to “teach the king how to live a virtuous life” (Adams 16). Going back to the very beginning, we see that the game of chess has its roots in civility and reason. Looking at it in this light, we see Marlowe’s hobby as one of virtue and an extension of his life’s work to right the wrongs of society.

This leads us to examine the Dude and Marlowe in the role of the knight/hero. Marlowe is often described this way: “He was Chandler’s knight errant, set to wade into the muck of trouble without having his integrity befouled” (Tyree 43). In *The Long*

Goodbye, Marlowe is told by Mr. Potter, “Don’t be a hero, young man. There’s no percentage in it” (*Goodbye* 236). And later, Linda Loring tells him, “Don’t be a hero, you fool” (*Goodbye* 342). But it seems as though Marlowe can’t help himself. Rowell quotes Megan Abbott, saying, “Chandler’s honorable detective Philip Marlowe shares with the cowboy a deep connection to a possibly imagined past in that he conceives of himself as a knight trapped in a world where knightly values no longer seem to belong” (Rowell 215). We also see this characteristic in the Dude, as he moves through L.A. trying to save Bunny from the kidnappers. Even when he’s doubtful of the intentions of the Big Lebowski and speculates that Bunny may have, in fact, kidnapped herself, he still is not convinced until she’s home, safe. Although he’s a somewhat reluctant knight figure, he still takes his job seriously, wincing as Brandt tells him, “Her life is in your hands, Dude” (*Lebowski*). He doesn’t want the responsibility of someone’s life, but he’s willing to take it, nonetheless. When he sees the toe that the kidnappers supposedly cut off Bunny’s foot, he becomes panicked that he’s put her in more danger. He emphatically tells Walter more than once, “They’re going to kill that poor woman!” (*Lebowski*). The film opens with a voice-over of a cowboy, the Stranger, saying: “Sometimes there’s a man – I won’t say a hee-ro, ‘cause what’s a hee-ro? – but sometimes there’s a man... Well, he’s the man for his time ‘n’ place, he fits right in there – and that’s the Dude, in Los Angeles” (*Lebowski*). This opening description of the Dude is a direct reflection of Chandler’s own idea of what a detective ought to be:

He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce

a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things. (*Murder* 18)

We see that both our detectives play the role of the hero, although it may not always be the traditional role we imagine. It is in just this reluctant, everyman knight/hero representation that we see America's better self. Here is the man who rejects commercialism and consumer culture, in order to find meaning in the simple pleasures of life. He is a man who believes in a right and a wrong and is willing to stand up to his convictions, in spite of the corruption and laws surrounding him. Yet, despite these honorable qualities, this man, this version of a better America, is not placed on a pedestal, nor would he want to be. There is something about knowing that he's out there that is enough to give us hope that corruption will not win. And as the Stranger says, "The Dude abides. I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowing he's out there. The Dude. Takin' 'er easy for all us sinners" (*Lebowski*).

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