

Call It (Friendo)  
Flipism & Folklore in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Dark Knight*  
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Whenever you're called on to make up your mind,  
and you're hampered by not having any,  
the best way to solve the dilemma, you'll find,  
is simply by spinning a penny.  
No – not so that chance shall decide the affair  
while you're passively standing there moping;  
but the moment the penny is up in the air,  
you suddenly know what you're hoping – Piet Hein,  
*A Psychological Tip* (Hein 1969).

Heads or tails. That's all it takes. Some call it in the air and let it hit the ground. Others call it before the toss, catch the coin in one hand and slap it on the back of the other. Whatever the method, flipping a coin has a long tradition in Western culture. From Caesar's "head" settling disputes, Donald Duck's adventures with Flipism<sup>1</sup>, the modern day use of a coin toss in sports, to the naming of Portland, OR, flipping a coin has been an influential part of Western and Anglo-American folklore for centuries. A seemingly simple game of chance has been a popular gambling and children's game, a mode of divination, a way to settle disputes, used to argue for the power of reason and prove the prudence of a legal system based on a jury of one's peers.

Like many aspects of folklore, coin tossing has made its way into film. Two of the most critically acclaimed films of 2007 and 2008 prominently feature coin tosses. Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), the cold blooded villain of the Coen Brothers Academy Award winning *No Country for Old Men*, and Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), the white knight district attorney in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, both use coin tosses throughout their respective films.

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<sup>1</sup> Disney animator Carl Barks coined the term Flipism in his 1953 Donald Duck comic "Flip Decision." The term has come to represent the philosophy of making decisions by flipping a coin. As Professor Batty tells Donald in the comic, "Life is but a gamble! Let Flipism chart your ramble!" (Barks).

The use of Flipism by Chigurh and Dent seemingly suggests a world ordered by fate, destiny and the cosmos. It is my contention however, that Flipism is used by the filmmakers to argue for the supremacy of free will in a chaotic world. Rather than leaving things to chance as tossing a coin seemingly suggests, both characters are fully aware of the choices they are making throughout, and the use of coin tosses is a calculated psychological tool implemented by two highly intelligent characters - not as a means to make decisions.

In order to fully understand how Flipism works in each film I will be first charting a brief history of coin tossing to help establish a background and folk tradition. This will frame the discussion as well as provide insight into how Chigurh and Dent implement and manipulate Flipism. I will then examine the ways in which Chigurh and Dent use Flipism, with specific examples of their particular brands of Flipism in action. Finally I will show why Flipism is a psychological tool and not an agent of fate.

### **Coin Toss – A Brief History**

Heads and Tails is a coin tossing game in contemporary America that derives from the British game Cross and Pile. As is so often the case with Western traditions, Cross and Pile actually originated in Ancient Greece. In the Greek game, according to William Wood Seymour, “a shell was smeared on one side with pitch, while the other was left in its original whiteness; when tossed in the air, the cry was night or day” (466). We can see in the whiteness and darkness of the seashell the beginning of one of the folk beliefs often associated with coin tosses, that of light and dark or good and evil. This idea is personified in the films by Dent and Chigurh. The new Gotham D.A., Dent is repeatedly referred to as the city’s “White Knight,” while Chigurh is

seen as evil incarnate, as film critic David DuBos notes, “the black-appareled Chigurh walks and stalks...dispensing Death wherever he goes...with a simple flip of a coin” (“No Exit”).

The belief in the righteousness of heads in part stems from the positive associations with the heads side of the coin. Coin flipping as a decision making tool dates to Roman times. While coins had been around for centuries, it wasn't until Julius Caesar came to power that using a coin flip to make a decision emerged. Caesar's head was on one side of every coin, so “heads” determined the winner. It was thought that “heads” meant that Caesar agreed with the decision. It was also believed that the coin flip also revealed the gods decision. In more modern times this idea has merged into the belief that a coin toss, particularly the heads side of the coin, shows God's will. The Roman method of coin flipping was taken very seriously, and was used to resolve disputes, property litigation, marriage issues and even in criminal court. Caesar's head on coins not only showed the right answer in any dispute, but it also is the root of the popular saying “Heads you win, tails you lose” (Batchelor and de Lys 52-54).

The idea of light versus dark, good versus evil, et cetera is further solidified with the British. While still used as a means to settle disputes, although not carrying the same legal stature as in Roman times, coin tossing in Britain is more associated as a gambling game. Named Cross and Pile because historically English coins were stamped on one side with a cross. By pitting the cross, signifying what Christians would argue is the ultimate symbol of light versus the bottom part of the die, which can be seen to symbolize Hell, the game intentionally or not heightened the belief of good versus evil. The cross has considerable significance in the Christian world, and “in popular lore it is regarded as a charm, the most potent protection against evil in existence” (Larousse 129). Furthermore, according to David Pickering, “because of its sacred associations, the cross is widely reputed to repel evil spirits of all kinds, from vampires to the devil” (65).

With the heavenly symbol of the cross on one side, and the corporeal pile side, we again see the contrast between the gods and man.

When the cross was replaced on British coins by the crown around 1600, the game took on further significance. The notion of the divine right of kings posited that a monarch derives his right to rule directly from the will of God (Figgis 1). With the British crown seen as having a divine connection, the calling of heads or tails again signifies more than a simple game of chance. Much like with Caesar, the heads side of the coin became associated with righteousness. By coming up heads, it is implied that the king (or Caesar) agrees with the decision, and by proxy so too does God. Due in part to the positive connotations of the heads side of the coin, there is even a belief among many that heads is more likely to be the result of a coin toss, even though a fairly weighted coin will yield a fifty-fifty result. Many people are familiar with the saying “see a penny, pick it up, and all day long you’ll have good luck.” However many people also won’t pick up a coin unless it is heads up, “Face up, pick it up. Face down, leave it down.” Picking up a tails side up coin is thought to bring bad luck.

The idea of coin flipping revealing God’s will has carried into American folklore. The heads side of the coin in American currency is embossed with the words “In God We Trust.” As Proverbs 16:20 states, “He who gives attention to the word will find good/And blessed is he who trusts in the Lord” (*New American Standard Bible*). As Christianity so often preaches, faith in God will be rewarded, likewise going against His will can be punished, so picking the heads side of the coin can be seen as putting one’s trust in God. On the flip side, the tails side of the coin has long been associated with darkness, evil and humanism; it is after all the side of the coin you can’t see. In American currency it does not feature any religious overtones; rather it features the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” – out of many, one. This highly secular phrase can be interpreted as

completely incompatible to Christianity in which there is one clear leader. E Pluribus Unum suggests a society that is strongest when it is following the will of the people, rather than the will of God. It argues for the power of reason over the philosophy of faith. With the Enlightenment and its challenges to God's will, the tails side of the coin began to take on an even more secular – i.e. negative – connotation, and heightens the notion of God's will (heads) versus free will (tails).

In contemporary America coin tossing has come to represent a flippant, fair or arbitrary way to make a decision, a sort of watered down version of the Roman system. As noted above there is still a seeming preference for the heads side of the coin, and a strong belief that a coin flip reveals God's will, fate and destiny. But coin flips are rarely still used for large decisions, instead it has become a way to settle trivial arguments and disputes. Do I want chocolate or vanilla ice cream? Which team will get the ball first in the Super Bowl?

Coin flipping has a long and winding tradition, and as a result there are several important beliefs about coin flipping that pervade American life. There is the idea that a coin flip is revealing God's will, or is simply fate. Some believe in the righteousness of the heads side of the coin, seeing it as heavenly and the tails side as secular and consequently evil or dark. Some see a coin flip as the most fair and arbitrary way to settle a small dispute. The debate concerning if flipping a coin is totally random or a predetermined outcome is not important. What is important is that these folk beliefs are exploited by Chigurh and Dent in their respective films.

### **Anton and Harvey Flip a Coin**

Before exploring the actual coin tosses in the films, first let us quickly look at Dent and Chigurh. The idea of good versus evil in a coin toss can be seen in the good versus evil portrayed by Dent and Chigurh. One is literally seen as death or the devil, while the other is “Gotham's

White Knight,” who has a crisis of faith near the end of the film where he questions just which side of the coin he represents. Not only do they symbolize certain sides of the coin in their respective films, but juxtaposed they also represent an interesting dichotomy. Dent can be seen to represent the heroic and righteous heads side of the coin, while Chigurh represents the dark tails side.

Dent is the stereotypical hero. Director Christopher Nolan actually cast Eckhart for the role because he embodies “that kind of chiseled, American hero quality” (Jolin). Further playing up the light versus dark motif, Eckhart even had his hair lightened for the role. While Dent stands for the hero, one way of viewing the film is to consider that Dent is essentially moving from the heads side of the coin to the tails side due to The Joker’s injection of chaos into Gotham. In the end though, because of Batman’s actions, Dent ultimately represents the heads side – the slain leader who sacrificed everything for the common good. Interestingly, Eckhart modeled the character on Robert F. Kennedy, who was “idealistic, held a grudge and took on the mob” (Keck). RFK, like Dent, had both light and dark qualities that made him good at his job.

While Dent represents the stereotypical hero, Chigurh is the prototypical villain. He is a ruthless murderer who displays little emotion. While Eckhart is a WASPish “chiseled American hero,” Chigurh is ethnic. He isn’t given an exact ethnicity, but one can assume based on the Southwest location that Chigurh is Mexican-American. This feeds on long held negative connotations about non-white peoples, as well as representing the idea that evil is dark. Richard Dyer’s *White* argues that whiteness has become synonymous with goodness. As Dyer argues, that it is said, even in liberal textbooks “that there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger.” These associations, argues Dyer, originate with the “Jewish and Christian use of white and black to symbolize good and evil, as

carried still in such expressions as ‘a black mark,’ ‘white magic,’ ‘to blacken the character’” (qtd. in Hooks 38). We have seen the connotations in coin flipping as well, where heads can be seen to equal white (Dent) and tails equal dark (Chigurh). Howard Thurman echoes these sentiments, arguing that race has purposely been mythologized so that white equals good, while “black is ugly, black is evil, black is demonic” (qtd. in Hooks 189).

Tellingly all of the people that Chigurh hunts and kills are white, furthering negative stereotypes and fears about Mexican immigration. As Leo Braudy notes, Chigurh’s evil “has no conscience or human nature that can be appealed to, and it is foreign” (10). He is foreign not only in ethnicity, but also as a part of the white world. He seemingly drops from the sky into the film, and at the end vanishes again. All of this fuels his villainy. Adding to his foreign nature is the manner in which he kills his victims. For much of the film he uses a cattle gun, shooting his victims in the forehead. This deprives them of their humanity, turning them into livestock. Jay Ellis argues that it also “deprives them of their living sight while imprinting in them a symbolic third eye—a visual representation of the enlightenment on matters of chance and destiny” (229). Chigurh then represents the secular side of the coin, while Dent is ultimately eulogized as a hero, looking over the city from above.

It is important to note that both films also use the heads side of the coin as the positive side of the coin. For example, when Chigurh flips a coin to determine if he will kill a gas station owner, the man calls “heads” and is allowed to live. Likewise Dent uses heads as the life giving side of the coin, telling one potential victim “Heads you get to keep your head. Tails not so lucky.” The assumption is that heads equals life, while tails equals death; a motif that runs through both *No Country for Old Men* and *The Dark Knight*.

Now that we have a general idea of the history and folklore of coin tossing, let's look at the coin tosses in the films, beginning with Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*. The film is set in west Texas in 1980, and "tells the story of a sheriff struggling along in the bloody wake of a psychopathic murderer [Chigurh]" (Cooper 37). Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), a local resident out hunting, stumbles upon a busted drug deal...and a bag with two million dollars. Moss takes the money and kicks off a series of cat and mouse games. Chigurh begins chasing Moss to recover the money, while Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) tries to track down either Moss or Chigurh. There are several bloody encounters, including a shoot out between Moss and Chigurh in a border town that leaves both of them wounded. Chigurh then tracks down Moss, kills him and takes the money. Bell nearly catches Chigurh at the scene of the final showdown, but Chigurh is able to avoid detection. Chigurh, true to his word, then tracks down Moss's wife and kills her. As he leaves the scene he is involved in a nasty car accident, and despite a severely broken arm he is able to leave the scene before the police arrive. The movie ends with Chigurh still on the loose.

In many ways the film follows a folktale narrative style. Linda Degh argues in "Folk Narrative" that folktales can be categorized by three basic qualities; first, a framed, narrated structure (Bell); second, formulaic speech patterns; and third, formulaic narrative arcs and character types (60-61). *No Country for Old Men* satisfies all of these requirements, and interestingly can be viewed as a type of folktale in its own right. The plot is a Pandora's Box type cautionary tale. As Cooper states, "Moss, an ordinary 'everyman,' stumbles upon a temptation (the cash), and upon succumbing to the temptation is pursued by a Vice character, Chigurh, who is also an archetypal 'Devil,' and a Virtue character, Bell, who tries and fails to get Moss to do the right thing by turning the money into the police" (48). Bell even offers a moral at

the end of the film, borrowing from Rip Van Winkle, when he comments that Moss and company “woke up and they don’t know how they got where they’re at.”

Not only is the plot similar to a fairytale, but so too are the characters, as their archetypes suggest. Much like the two sides of a coin, Bell and Chigurh represent two sides of the film’s moral code. As Cooper argues, “nihilism (represented by Chigurh) and morality (represented by Bell) defend their cases against each other...[the film ends] with the nihilist exiting the stage while the moralist remains, diffident and undefended” (39). Not only does Chigurh represent the Christian idea of the Devil, but he also can be associated with the border folklore idea of the devil as a shape shifter. Chigurh is so terrifying to Bell and others because he does not kill for malice. This is incongruous with the Christian Devil, and is actually more in line with “an arbitrary wrecker-of-havoc like Native American tricksters” (Cooper 49). Additionally, his survival of three near death experiences and his ability to seemingly vanish, such as at the end of the film, is more comparable to the trickster type than the Devil. The trickster or shape shifter can change their external shape at will, while retaining a consistent identity. So the evil witch can appear as a young woman or beautiful princess, but their essential identity is the same (Garry and El-Shamy 126).

Chigurh’s character in many ways is comparable to a character type in folklore because he is seemingly two-dimensional. As Vladimir Propp points out in *Theory and History of Folklore*, characters in folklore differ from characters in literature primarily because, in folklore, characters are “types,” not individuals (27). Cooper believes that Chigurh is not only “a typed character, but he is also depicted with supernatural overtones. At one point...Sheriff Bell assures himself and another deputy that Chigurh is, in the final analysis, not a ghost. The other man replies, ‘I guess if he was a ghost you wouldn’t have to worry about him’” (43). Chigurh also

engages each of his victims in a dialogue, much like the stereotypical fairytale villain. Like the big bad wolf huffing and puffing, Chigurh forces a conversation with his victims before ultimately deciding their fate.

Chigurh and Bell both ultimately possess jobs in which they decide other men's fates; Bell as a sheriff and Chigurh as a hit man. Bell follows the standard of the law, while Chigurh follows his own code, represented in the film by a coin toss. There are two examples in the film where Chigurh uses a coin toss to seemingly decide the fate of his victim, once early in the movie with a "random" gas station attendant and then again at the end of the film with Carla Jean. I will also be looking at one other incident in the film where Chigurh does not offer his victim the chance to "call it."

In the first coin flipping scene, an unnamed gas station owner encounters Chigurh and makes a few remarks about Chigurh (specifically that he is from out of town, i.e. foreign) that alerts Chigurh to a possible complication. The conversation quickly moves from small talk to something more. In an instant Chigurh has begun to evaluate the situation, and the old man is quite aware of what has just walked into his gas station. At the height of the intensity, Chigurh asks, "What's the most that you have ever lost on a coin toss?" Before the man can grasp what is happening and answer, Chigurh flips a coin, covers it with his hand, and states, "Call it." While there is a definite sense of malice and almost joy in Chigurh's voice, it is also completely controlled, which is simply terrifying to the man.

After a moment of silence, Chigurh again extols the man to call it, telling him, "You need to call it. I can't call it for you. It wouldn't be fair." The man replies that he hasn't "put nothin' up." Chigurh replies that, indeed, he has been "putting it up" his whole life. During the conversation we learn that the man married into owning the gas station, and therefore according

to Chigurh hasn't earned what he has become. Chigurh seems to imply that the man's actions have brought this moment into being. Terrified, the man asks what he stands to win, and Chigurh simply replies "Everything...Now call it." The man calls heads, which is the "correct" call. Chigurh does not kill him, and actually gives the quarter to the man to keep as his "lucky quarter."

The second episode that I'd like to analyze actually does not involve a coin toss, and that is precisely why it is important. This encounter is between Chigurh and fellow hit man Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson). Wells has been hired by Moss to kill Chigurh, yet it is Chigurh who tracks down Wells. Unlike the encounter at the gas station, this time there is a personal history between the two men. Wells is brash, arrogant, predatory and manipulative, so he does not elicit the same type of sympathy as the gas station owner. Unlike Chigurh, who never gives a clear reason for his line of work, with Wells he is clearly a less than moral character that is more than willing to exploit and kill people to make a buck. To make him even more unseemly, he seems to relish his line of work. This arrogance, however, proves to be his undoing.

Wells has grossly underestimated Chigurh, referring to him as a "garden variety homicidal maniac." Chigurh seems to be somewhat perturbed by the fact that Wells does not recognize that he is not up against a run of the mill hit man. When Chigurh and Wells come face to face (Chigurh with a shotgun in hand), this time there is no offer of a coin flip. For Wells there is no opportunity for a reprieve, or as I argue, there is no illusion of a reprieve. Chigurh seemingly wants Wells to admit that he is going to die and accept his fate. He asks Wells "if the rule that you have followed brought you to this point...then what use is the rule?" At the beginning of the question Chigurh is smiling, but by the end he has his patented stare splashed across his face. Wells tries to offer Chigurh money to spare his life, but again Wells

misunderstands the man he is up against. Finally Wells utters the trademark line “You don’t have to do this.” Chigurh simply replies, “They all say that,” and then kills Wells.

Chigurh seems completely unfazed by having just killed a man. He simply kicks his feet up so that his shoes won’t become soaked with blood and answers the ringing phone. As “fate” would have it, the phone call is from Llewelyn Moss. Chigurh tells Moss to turn in the money. If Moss does so Chigurh vows to spare Moss’s wife Carla Jean (though not Moss), noting that it is “the best he can do.” Moss, out of fear, vows to keep running, which leads to the third encounter I’d like to look at between Chigurh and Carla Jean.

Chigurh finds Carla Jean at her mother’s house. By this point he has already recovered the money and killed Llewelyn. As the two sit opposite one another, Chigurh is clearly not relishing the encounter the way he did with Wells, and doesn’t have the same electricity that was present with the gas station owner. Instead he seems resigned; resigned to the fact that he must kill Carla Jean because Llewelyn refused to turn over the money. When Chigurh informs Carla Jean that her husband had the chance to save her, she pleads ignorance and innocence. Like many of his victims she tells Chigurh, “You don’t have to do this.” Chigurh pauses for a moment and unlike earlier encounters where he was using the silence to build fear, this time he appears to be hesitant. It is in this moment that he decides to offer Carla Jean a chance.

Unlike the gas station attendant, Carla Jean refuses to play the game. Chigurh urges her to “call it.” Yet she refuses, telling him “The coin don’t have no say in it. It’s just you.” Chigurh seems to weigh this response, before telling her that he “got here the same way as the coin did.” She still refuses to play the game, and a moment later we see him leaving her house checking the soles of his shoes to make sure that he isn’t tracking any of her blood.

Was Carla Jean able to see something that Chigurh's other victims could not? Did she uncover the ruse of his game, or blow her last chance at life? The coin flip does not represent God's will or fate, as some have argued, rather it is a calculated move by a killer that steadfastly adheres to logic. Chigurh follows a strong sense of cause and effect. He is after all a byproduct of society (including the Vietnam War); he didn't just fall from the sky. He firmly believes that his actions are simply a part of a long chain of connected events. It is his victims that have caused their own demise. They have put themselves into the crosshairs, Chigurh is simply the end result (or effect) of their choices and actions.

In the scene with gas station attendant, Chigurh is happy to pay and be on his way. It is not until the man begins asking questions that Chigurh acts. Chigurh made a conscious choice to let the man go; the coin flip had nothing to do with his fate. The coin flip quite simply put the fear of God into the man. Chigurh needed to ensure that the man wouldn't follow up on his earlier questions about Chigurh and his plans. Remember that at this point Chigurh has recently killed a police officer and several others and is hunting a man carrying two million dollars of illegal Mexican drug money, so it is reasonable to assume that Chigurh wants to cover his bases. Rather than kill the man, which would have aroused more suspicion and given away his location, Chigurh decides to leave the man be, knowing that after the encounter he won't be talking to anyone about Anton Chigurh out of pure fear. What better way to arouse fear than to present yourself as someone willing to *kill* based on pure chance? As Chigurh states at the end after giving the coin to the man, "don't put it in your pocket...where it will be mixed in with the others and become just a coin." Chigurh then pauses, cracks a half smile, and says, "Which it is." What seems like a menacing exit line, is actually a rather telling line about Chigurh's coin tossing philosophy. He was never going to kill the man based on a coin flip.

Another reason that Chigurh doesn't kill the man is because, as absurd as it seems, Chigurh does not needlessly kill. Apart from the logical reasons not to kill the man – it would create a scene, the police would come, etc; it also isn't necessary. While Chigurh does kill several other “innocent” people throughout the film, he does not do so purely for the thrill of the kill. The hotel clerk for example, is killed because Chigurh knows that Moss is at the hotel. Chigurh assumes that he will kill Moss, which means that the police will be coming. Therefore, in his mind, he needs to eliminate any witnesses that can put him at the scene of the crime. Furthermore, he isn't creating an entirely new crime scene as he would if he killed the gas station owner, rather he is only adding to the one he plans to create anyway. Chigurh is the ultimate hit man, at the pinnacle of his profession. He knows when he killing someone is necessary and when it is not. While he has no qualms with actually killing someone that is simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, he does not kill for pure pleasure. The legend of Chigurh, fed by the idea that he kills based on a coin flip, actually makes it easier for Chigurh not to kill. He doesn't have to prove anything to anyone, so he is able to let innocent people like the gas station owner live. His next encounter, with a less accomplished and seasoned hit man/bounty hunter further demonstrates Chigurh's ability to asses a situation and shows the value he places on life.

The encounter with Wells shows that Chigurh is in complete control of his choices, and is not an agent of God or the Devil or anyone. He is the result of reason. Wells chose to try and kill Chigurh for a quick buck. The likely outcome of the situation was that either he would kill Chigurh or vice versa. By grossly underestimating Chigurh, Wells has flipped his own coin so to speak. The rules of the agreement Wells made dictate that someone must die, in this case Wells. Likewise with Carla Jean, Chigurh already offered to let her go free. Carla Jean's husband stole the money, so one could argue that she had no role in the affair. But she did nothing to try and

stop him, and in Chigurh's world, she also chose to marry Llewelyn, knowing his faults – although perhaps not knowing one of those faults would be to forfeit a chance to save her life. In that way she is an accomplice, yet Chigurh is willing to forgive her and spare her life. If Moss returns the money and turns himself in, she lives; if he does not, she dies. Simple cause and effect. Since Moss did not turn in the money, in Chigurh's world she must therefore die. She recognizes this cause and effect reasoning, and therefore does not submit to his coin flipping charade. Chigurh is simply trying, as unfathomable as it may seem, to give Carla Jean the illusion that she has some agency over her life, since, much like the gas station owner, it was not her direct action that led Chigurh to this point. She sees through this and declines to call it, knowing that heads or tails, she is dead.

While Chigurh might be one of the most iconic villains of all time, *The Dark Knight's* Harvey Dent is “the hero Gotham needs.” Set a single year after *Batman Begins*, the film follows Batman's (Christian Bale) quest to rid Gotham of the mob. Aiding in his quest are Lt. James Gordon (Gary Oldman) and the new district attorney Harvey Dent. The three men form a revolving heroic triumvirate, countered by the psychopathic criminal The Joker (Heath Ledger). Dent manages to lock up nearly all of the city's criminals, but his achievements are spoiled by The Joker, who sets up a series of either/or ethical challenges that wreak havoc on the city and the film's heroes. The Joker's ultimate test forces Batman to choose between saving Dent or their mutual love interest Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Batman chooses to save Dent, although Dent's face gets mutilated in a fantastic explosion. Dent then goes on a spree of revenge, turning into the villain from the comic series Two Face<sup>2</sup> before he is ultimately killed by Batman. Knowing that the city needs the symbol of Dent to live on, Batman takes the blame for Dent's

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<sup>2</sup> Nolan insists that Dent is dead at the end of the movie, leaving the villain Two Face dead as well. In that sense the film is much more about Dent and his heroic symbolism than solely his transformation into a villain.

spree, leaving Dent as the city's white knight, and Batman as the dark knight. As Lt. Gordon sums up their relationship, "One the hero Gotham needs, the other the hero Gotham deserves."

Much like Chigurh and Bell, Dent and Batman can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. For that matter, there are a series of coin pairs in the film: Batman and The Joker; Dent and The Joker; Gordon and Batman, Dent and Two Face among others. In each pair there is clearly a "good guy" and a "bad guy." Batman is also a coin; both a symbol of hope to many and a member of the criminal underground to others. Bruce Wayne, as a playboy billionaire and a masked vigilante furthers the two sides of the coin motif. The film itself can also be seen as a battle being waged with light and dark, fire and shadows. The Joker wants to create a dark world by using fire, while Batman presents a symbol of hope by wearing a mask and operating under the cloak of darkness to bring about peace and order. Dent is so appealing to both Gotham and Batman because he is bringing light to the city in broad daylight. With all of the light and dark connotations, it should come as no surprise that the film has implemented coin tossing.

There are a whopping nine scenes in the film that feature a coin toss. First I'll look at Dent's very first coin flip scene in court, second his coin flip with a captured criminal, and finally his coin flipping montage after his accident when he is essentially Two Face. I shall only focus on a few here to demonstrate that Dent, much like Chigurh, is not leaving anything up to chance. For the first three quarters of the film Dent can't leave it to chance because he is using a double-headed Peace Quarter (notice that it is not double-tails since Dent is a hero). As the film begins Dent has just been elected Gotham's new D.A.. He exudes a heroic quality, and vows to clean up the city. He is literally the face of hope that Batman cannot be, the heads to Batman's tails. As Bruce Wayne notes, "Gotham needs a hero with a face."

The first instance of a coin flip comes at the trial of mobster Sal Maroni. Dent is slightly late to the trial and when he arrives, Assistant District Attorney, and Bruce's childhood friend and ex-girlfriend, Rachel Dawes starts to tear into Dent. Exuding charm he offers to let her chair the case based on a coin flip, "Heads I take it, tails it's yours." Again, notice that heads is the positive choice. Rachel indignantly replies, "Flip a coin?...And leave something this big to chance?" Dent flips the coin, and of course it comes up heads, to which he replies, "I make my own luck." At this point in the film the audience is not yet aware that Dent is using a double sided coin. Yet that is partially irrelevant. Much like Chigurh, Dent has already made his decision and is using the coin flip to achieve another goal. In this instance he is trying to prove his prowess, both as a lawyer and a potential lover. He seemingly is leaving a giant case to chance, yet once the trial begins he displays an amazing talent and preparedness, disarming a potential assassin and getting a confession.

The second time we see a coin flip, Dent is interrogating a criminal in the back of an ambulance after an assassination attempt on the mayor. The criminal thinks that he has an emotional Dent right where he wants him, and plays coy. That is when Dent takes out his coin. He points his gun at the criminal's head and says, "Heads you keep your head, tails not so lucky." The criminal doesn't quite believe Dent, who flips the coin and of course it comes up heads. The criminal laughs, but Dent stops him by flipping the coin again. This causes the man to scream in terror, and plead with Dent that he doesn't have any useful information about The Joker. Batman interjects, asking Dent why he is leaving the situation to chance, to which Dent, again replies that he isn't. He flips the coin to Batman, who along with the audience sees that Dent is using a double sided coin. Again, we see that Dent is not using the coin toss to make a decision, but is using it as a psychological tool to manipulate the other person.

The final set of coin flips that I'd like to look at take place after Dent has had half of his face burned off. The explosion also left Dent's coin burned on one side, so for the first time in the film he has a coin with two sides. After a hospital visit from The Joker, in which The Joker convinces Dent/Two Face that there are no rules, only chaos, Dent sets out to get revenge for the murder of his fiancée Rachel. On his quest for revenge Dent/Two Face uses his new coin on The Joker, two police officers who betrayed him, Batman, himself and Gordon's young son. Interestingly, the first person that Dent/Two Face shoots based on a coin flip, the dirty cop Wirtz, is actually not a coin flip. He spins the coin on a bar top, and when the burned side comes up (of course the clean heads side still represents life) Dent/Two Face shoots Wirtz. It is a slight distinction, but the audience never actually sees Dent/Two Face kill Wirtz. The coin comes to rest on the dark side and then Dent/Two Face fires his gun. While it is implied that Wirtz has been killed, it is not certain.

Similarly, when Dent/Two Face shoots Sal Maroni's driver based on a coin flip we don't actually see the violence. Just moments before Maroni had "survived" his own coin flip, but his driver "wasn't so lucky." All that the audience sees is Dent/Two Face putting on his seat belt and then firing his gun, causing the car to spin out of control and crash. Again, it can be assumed that the driver and Maroni are dead, but it is not certain, after all Dent/Two Face walked away from the accident. Furthermore, in the aftermath of Dent/Two Face's spree, it is noted that several people were left unconscious in the wake of violence. It isn't absurd to assume that Maroni and his driver fall into this category.

The end of the film features a series of interesting and revealing coin flips. Dent/Two Face has brought Lt. Gordon's family to the site of Rachel's murder. He wants to make Gordon watch a loved one die, much like he had to listen to Rachel die. After determining that Gordon's

son (who of course is the only member of the family with bright blonde hair) is the person whom Gordon loves the most, Dent/Two Face sets out on his coin flips. Batman, who arrives fresh from defeating The Joker, is the first to have his fate flipped. The coin comes up on the dark side, and so Dent/Two Face shoots him. It's important to note that he shoots Batman in the stomach. This suggests that he doesn't want to kill Batman, because throughout the course of the film Dent and Batman have seen how important they are to each other and to the future of Gotham. The next coin flip is for Dent/Two Face himself. The coin comes up heads, so he lives. The final flip is for Gordon's son, but while the coin is in the air Batman knocks Dent/Two Face away, sending him plummeting to his death. As Dent lies dead, the coin comes to rest on heads. Knowing that Gotham's new-found hope would be destroyed, and the cases he made against the mob would be dismissed should Dent/Two-Face's crimes become known, Batman and Gordon decide to trick Gotham into thinking that Batman, in a vengeful fury, has committed all of Dent/Two-Face's murders. The symbol of Dent lives on, not as the dark side of his personality, but as the light side. Much like the two sides of the coin, Dent lives on as the pristine heads side, the white knight.

The film shows two different uses for coin flipping. As Dent, coin flipping is not a decision making tool, rather it is a device to achieve a different end – a psychological advantage. As Two Face, coin flipping becomes a decision making tool, leaving several dead. In this way the film both reinforces and subverts folk beliefs. Initially Dent uses the folk belief to his advantage, but as Two Face he uses the folk belief to make choices, in a way absolving himself from the consequences.

Yet even when Dent is at his most villainous, the coin flipping has slight distinctions. As noted above, when he shoots Wirtz he spins the coin, which suggests that Dent/Two Face has

already made up his mind as to what he's going to do. Likewise, when the coin comes up black for Batman, Dent/Two Face shoots him in the abdomen, again suggesting that killing Batman is not his goal. Rather he is trying to show Gordon that if the coin comes up black, he will pull the trigger. Whether or not he will actually kill the boy is not relevant at that moment (and a decision I don't think Dent/Two Face has made yet or wants to make. By not killing Batman it can be argued that he subconsciously is avoiding making the decision, knowing that Batman will intervene). He wants to put Gordon through the agony of having to talk to someone in a seemingly hopeless situation and "lie" to them that everything is going to be okay. Shooting Batman achieves this state, killing him is not necessary. It is also noteworthy that Dent/Two Face is also angry at Gordon for not standing up to corruption in the police force, which led to Rachel's death. Even as a villain, Dent/Two Face is worried about government corruption.

### **Call It**

While the Romans used a coin toss as a serious and legally binding way to solve problems, and coin flipping has long been associated with demonstrating God's will, coin flipping in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Dark Knight* actually work to show man's superiority over his own fate. Rather than leaving things to chance as tossing a coin seemingly suggests, both characters are fully aware of the choices they are making throughout, and rather than follow folk beliefs, they actually manipulate those beliefs. As Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones note in *Folkloristics*, "folklore is first and foremost a behavioral phenomenon" (231). Georges and Owens argue that folklore is not simply a traditional artifact, but it can be an active phenomenon. In researching how children play games, they state "ignoring how a child alters the rules of play or employs strategies to turn chance into something to be controlled and

exploited overlooks an important fact of human behavior... Individuals... personalize folklore, utilize it for psychological or spiritual ends, and even exploit it as a means of self-aggrandizement” (264).

So why did the filmmakers change the traditional folk belief? With nearly every single instance of coin flipping in the films, the outcome of the coin toss is not a determining factor in what happens next. Rather it is a psychological tool employed by Chigurh and Dent to gain an edge over their adversary. They are using the folk beliefs that are associated with coin flipping to their advantage. The people on the other side of the coin flips are assuming that Chigurh and Dent are going to act based on a random act of chance. They also believe that the outcome of the coin toss is in some way a valid verdict, a binding decision that is a direct descendant of the Roman belief. Yet neither character, both of whom are in their own way obsessive and carefully crafted, would leave major decisions to chance. They each have a plan, and flipping a coin is a part of the plan; a means to achieve an end, not the end in itself.

Therefore the randomness of a coin toss works to make Chigurh an even more terrifying figure. It helps transform him into an evil, killing machine. Deciding to kill someone based on a coin flip feeds his legend, and builds him into something that he is not. Chigurh does not kill based on a coin toss, he kills based on action, choices and consequences. The coin tossing works to make him a figure that you don't want to cross, it doesn't determine your fate however – it shows that you determine your own fate. The “randomness” of a coin toss in Dent's case gives him a psychological advantage over the criminals in his city, and adds to his own charm and effectiveness. With a double sided coin he dictates the outcome of his coin tosses, while making others believe that he is leaving things to chance. In one way he is also using the folk belief that coin tosses show God's will...and He happens to be on Harvey Dent's side.

Coin flipping then is not a random act that shows us God's will. It is a calculated method employed by two incredibly intelligent and strong willed characters to gain an advantage. By manipulating the traditional folk beliefs associated with coin flipping they give themselves an edge over their adversary. By using a coin flip to seemingly make decisions, Chigurh and Dent help tip the odds from a flip of the coin to their side.

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