

DOES LLEWYN SAVE THE CAT?

STC Analysis of *Inside Llewyn Davis*

by Tom Reed

The latest Coen Brothers movie has divided audiences and critics. Some call it a poetic and profound masterpiece; others find it dull, off-putting and depressing. Considering the paltry box office it's clear mainstream moviegoers have ignored it. Along with the Academy. Why? What's the explanation? Is this greater or lesser Coen Brothers?

When I found out that *a cat* figured prominently in the action, I was immediately intrigued by the prospect of applying the BS2. Given the narrative prominence of a feline (an orange tabby, no less), this was a must-do. Not that I ever thought the Coens consciously applied it themselves – they're too iconoclastic for that. They go their own way. On the other hand, they are master craftsmen at the height of their powers, which is why I was irresistibly drawn to see where and how the worlds of Blake Snyder and Joel and Ethan Coen intersected, if at all, and if that exploration could shed light on the movie and its performance. I think it can.

Inside Llewyn Davis is a small, somber film, especially by mainstream standards. It feels like a character study, as Oscar Isaac, the actor portraying Llewyn, occupies virtually every frame, and doesn't do much more than bounce around NYC looking for a place to sleep and a few bucks, playing some tunes along the way while alienating family and friends wherever he goes. Though unmistakably character-driven, it is far more than a mere character study. Its genre, from an STC perspective, is straight up **Golden Fleece**, a classic example of the Solo Fleece where the heart of the story is a journey the Hero takes alone, and a lesson he can only learn (or fail to learn) by himself. Despite its modest scale, this story (like Llewyn himself) has sizable thematic ambition.

After seeing the film I read the script, so I'll use script page numbers as anchor points for the BS2. But the completed film is the real subject here.

Opening Image (pages 1 – 3):

We open on Llewyn singing. He is a folk singer in Greenwich Village circa 1961. We can immediately see he is a talented and soulful musician, though he doesn't go out of his way to make himself accessible. The work speaks for itself, even as it speaks for him, and this song ("I've Been All Around This World"), like many folk songs, is mournful and fatalistic, about a man taking a stand against insuperable odds that will likely end in death. It perfectly defines Llewyn and foreshadows much of what is to come – including the basic idea that life is a relentless exercise in futility.

Are we having fun yet?



Opening Image: “Hang me, oh hang me” – despair hovers like a (fore)shadow.

After the song, Llewyn is told there is a man waiting for him out back, a “man in a suit.” Llewyn ventures into the alley where he promptly gets beaten up. But why? We’ll have to wait to find out.

Set-Up (pages 4 – 22):

Blake tells us a story’s Set-Up is all about detailing the ‘the six things that need fixing’ in the Hero’s life, at home, work and play (social life). This is exactly what happens in the film as we find Llewyn waking up on the couch at a friend’s place (Mitch and Lillian Gorfein, academics who teach at nearby Columbia), then making his way downtown to visit his manager Mel, then stowing his stuff at another friend’s place (Jim and Jean’s) who are not happy to see him (at least Jean’s not). So what’s communicated in a lean 14 pages is this: Llewyn literally has no home (‘home’), and though he has recorded an album (he’s got that far, at least), he has no sales, no royalties and therefore no money (‘work’), and he has become a burden to his friends and is now relegated from the couch to the floor (‘play/social life’). We also learn he doesn’t even own a winter coat, and it’s brutally cold outside, which is trouble on the most basic level. There’s a lot of things that need fixing here. Llewyn is an itinerant musician; a starving artist; a vagabond suffering the commonplace, persistent and demeaning misfortunes of the poor, which is perhaps why folk music resonates so deeply inside him. The man is a walking folk song.

Theme Stated (page 8):

One additional troublesome thing happens on page six: when Llewyn is leaving the Gorfein’s apartment, their cat gets out. The cat! The door locks behind him so he can’t put it back, and the elevator operator is no help, so Llewyn must take the cat with him on his sojourn downtown. This is an extremely dubious decision – to take a housecat on a subway at all, let alone in the dead of winter – a good length of Manhattan. But it speaks to Llewyn’s myopic

priorities. From a storytelling perspective it's useful because it gives Llewyn an ongoing problem to solve – to look after the cat. But since it also thrusts the cat on a road trip in the big, bad, cruel world, there is a subtle one-to-one correspondence established between the Hero and the cat, one that is communicated in dialogue. When Llewyn tries to leave a message with Mitch's assistant that he has the cat, she misunderstands him and repeats back, "Llewyn is the cat." He clarifies, "Llewyn has the cat. I'm Llewyn. I have his cat." But it has already been said: Llewyn is the cat. An inconsequential misunderstanding by an off screen character? Or Theme Stated? I suggest the latter. So, among his other goals, Llewyn's mission is to Save the Cat – the Gorfein's... and himself. And Blake is getting the joke.



Set-Up: Llewyn holds his doppelganger – the allegorical cat.

Catalyst (page 17 and 22):

There are two catalysts, one personal, one professional. The first, the personal, happens on page 17, in the form of 'a problem to solve' when Jean reveals to Llewyn that she's pregnant. She has a lot of nasty things to say about Llewyn, and given that she's part of his inner circle of Greenwich Village artists, and close enough to have actually slept with him, we're inclined to believe her. Curiously, Llewyn offers little defense, which makes him appear taciturn and aloof (decidedly catlike qualities). But he cares enough about her that he shoulders the responsibility of paying for her abortion without hesitation, even though she's not sure he's the father, and he knows he only has pennies to his name. Doing the right thing here is – ironically and characteristically Coen – 'killing the cat.'

The second catalyst is professional and happens on page 22 in a conversation between Llewyn and Troy Nelson, another folk troubadour staying with Jim and Jean. Llewyn, a man who has thus far taken little interest in anything, is piqued when Troy reveals that *Bud Grossman* has agreed to manage him. Though Llewyn maintains his persona of disaffected disengagement (more catishness), he nonetheless plies Troy with questions, and later we discover that Llewyn had previously asked his manager Mel to send Bud his own album "Inside Llewyn Davis." Bud Grossman, then, is a catalyst in the form of 'a desire to fulfill,' representing the holy grail of Llewyn's professional quest: a manager and club owner powerful enough to help Llewyn break through, if not to mainstream success (because such a thing is unheard of in these 'pre-Dylan days') then at least to making ends meet. This is Llewyn's Golden Fleece, and it's the universal (and primal) goal of any artist – to earn a living by their art. This is something that Llewyn is currently miles and miles away from – more than "500 Miles," as a

matter of fact – a sentimental folk song we see sung by Jim, Jean and Troy, which Llewyn evidently thinks little of.

Debate (pages 22 – 59):

Llewyn's professional goals, however, are deeply submerged, both to the viewer and himself, as Jean suggests when they're conversing at a café on page 46. The Debate section of this film, then, is far longer than normal. It only ends after the Midpoint on page 59. But this is perfectly in keeping with Llewyn's character; he's not an action hero who aggressively takes charge of his life, resolving his Debate and predictably bringing about Act II by page 30. No, he is an artist, and one with a complicated relationship to success. He wants people to come to him, not the other way around. He's passive-aggressive. He won't take action until absolutely forced to by inexorably eliminating all paths of least resistance. That's his 'catlike' character, and one of the central things the Coens are examining. And it takes a lot of script pages. The scene at the café is all about this problem, which Jean perceives as a fundamental flaw. She says, "You don't even want to get anywhere! At least me and Jim try!" But he protests, saying "I do wanna... I wanna..." Though he has trouble actually saying the words, he does have ambition; it's just that he believes to admit it, let alone pursue it, is somehow unseemly, "careerist," "square." He's a purist, and he believes the art, if it's good enough, is all that matters. He is grossly mistaken. Because he's in "show business" and it's an entirely different animal, and it's interesting that his practical-minded sister Joy recognizes that. She refers to what he does as "show business." Llewyn never uses that term because he's hostage to his own ideals, his own artistic integrity. What's more, he doesn't even know it. This internal, subtextual debate rages quietly under the surface as Llewyn attempts to address the more pressing problems of paying for Jean's abortion and returning the Gorfein's cat – the latter of which is further complicated when the cat escapes Jim and Jean's apartment on page 23. The cat is AWOL in NYC. How's a guy supposed to jump-start a non-existent career with all these distractions (aka, 'saving the cat' duties)? Ah, the plight of the poor, the struggling, the unsuccessful. Another primary thing the Coens are exploring.

The B Story (pages 28 – 53):

Blake tells us that the B Story is where the story's theme is examined and its spiritual lesson delivered. It's where the 'Transformation' at the heart of the story gets addressed. So, in addition to having two catalysts, this film has two B Stories: Jean and the Cat. Whereas the cat represents Llewyn himself, Jean represents the object of his desire, something he loves. He professes his love to her (in a typically low-key way) on page 100. The only *other* thing he loves is folk music. He only seems fully engaged when he's performing. It's his one true devotion, his core identity. And just like Jean, folk music treats him badly. It's unsentimental and cruel, and is something for which he will endure no end of pain. Jean also represents a different way to approach his art, one that's more practical and mercenary. Will Llewyn learn this lesson, learn to adjust, as Jean suggests, and save himself? Or is he destined to live a tragic life of unfulfilled promise and obscurity? Will he ever be recognized as an artist of impact, or an artist at all? Will he forever be a folk song?

"To be (heard), or not to be (heard), that is the question."



Jean: the beautiful, hostile, mercenary, foul-mouthed B Story.

Break into Two (pages 60 – 74):

Given the extended Debate, the true Break into Two is postponed until page 60 – an extremely rare structural occurrence, but one that stems organically from character. So what happens on page 30 instead? More Set-Up: a look into Llewyn’s past, another aspect of his home life and more things that need fixing. He goes to meet his sister to see if she’s a source of money (she’s not), and we get a sense of their estrangement. We also hear about their father, now apparently in a home, and judging from Llewyn’s indifference we can guess there’s more estrangement there. And finally, we hear about Llewyn’s former career as a merchant marine, a reasonable fallback profession according to his practical-minded sister, “if the music’s not [working out.]” It’s interesting that this former career is also a kind of wandering, much like his current rootless life of riding subways up and down and around New York. But he dismisses it as mere “existing,” by which he means it provides no hope of fulfilling himself as an artist, even though pursuing his art is bringing him nothing but poverty and misery.

Fun & Games (pages 35 – 40):

Despite the film’s somber tone it is far from humorless – the Coen Brothers are too innately playful and ironic to do that. The funniest set-piece happens just where it should, according to Blake: between pages 30 and 40. It also fulfills another aspect of F&G – it shows the Hero doing what he does best, engaging in a ‘creative journey.’ Here we see the strength and range of Llewyn’s musicianship as we watch him learn and perform a song under pressure in a recording studio. The Fun & Games nature of the scene is also satirical as it makes fun of the inanities of pop music. Jim has written a ‘protest song’ called “Please Mr. Kennedy (don’t send me outer into space),” and Llewyn has been asked to participate. True to form he is dismissive of Jim’s song, ever his own worst enemy. But he learns that if he waves his royalties he’ll get paid \$200, enough to finance Jean’s abortion. It’s a no-brainer – he’ll take the \$200.



Fun & Games, Mr. Kennedy!

And if we factor in the storyteller's perspective then there's an additional level of Fun & Games, because later it is suggested the song will be a hit, yet Llewyn, who is in dire need, will not profit from it – a pernicious reversal. Llewyn is left out in the cold.

In a similar vein, soon thereafter, Llewyn learns from the abortionist that he doesn't have to pay this time around because his former girlfriend – whose abortion he had already paid for – never went through with it. She had the baby and moved back to Ohio. So, it appears Llewyn didn't have to come up with the money to help Jean after all, which means he didn't have to give up his royalties. And on top of everything, he has learned he has fathered a child he never knew about. O, what a cruel and ironic universe it is in *Coenland*.

Midpoint (pages 53 – 59):

But one good thing happens: the Gorfein's cat shows up, randomly sighted and retrieved by Llewyn while having coffee with Jean. So he treks back uptown to return it, politely accepting an offer to stay for dinner. He's asked to play something, and though he rarely performs outside of a professional setting, he begrudgingly agrees. He plays a song he recorded with his former partner, Mike, but when Mitch's wife Lillian gives impromptu accompaniment, Llewyn tells her to "Stop doing that." Everything sours, but a moment of social awkwardness suddenly plummets into wholesale disaster when Lillian realizes the cat he brought with him is the wrong cat! It's not even the right gender. "Where's his scrotum, Llewyn?! WHERE'S HIS SCROTUM!" Even this good deed – Llewyn's attempt to Save the Cat – ends in total failure, and even better (according to Blake), public humiliation. The poor cat is still AWOL (out in the cold, mirroring Llewyn), and Llewyn has few options left. He is forced to take drastic action.

Break into Two / Bad Guys Close In (pages 60 – 74):

Drastic action, in this case, is to leave NYC and follow his dream: to trek to Chicago and somehow meet Bud Grossman. Though this happens on page 60, it is still Break into Two because it's where Llewyn finally enters the 'upside down world' in pursuit of his A-Story goal. As strife-strewn, uprooted and unpredictable as his life in Manhattan is, at least it's familiar. That's what makes it the Thesis World. When he climbs into the car and joins jazz

musician Roland Turner and his nearly wordless driver, Johnny Five, he enters the topsy-turvy world of Anti-Thesis.

It's worth noting that at this point we the audience are not really sure why Llewyn's going; we can only assume. Nothing has reminded us or underscored it. Like almost everything concerning Llewyn's ambition, his behavior and motivations are guarded, self-contained, subtle. Invisible. Catlike. We are left to follow along as best we can. As audience members we are chasing him, like chasing a housecat in the garden.

But there is nothing guarded or subtle about Roland Turner, the hulking motor-mouth of vitriol filling the back seat, another unforgettable incarnation by John Goodman. Llewyn and Turner actually have much in common; they're both arrogant, critical, competitive know-it-alls who have traveled the world, except that Turner is a cantankerous, bombastic extrovert to Llewyn's stoic, wry introvert. Turner is Llewyn on steroids. Something else differentiates them: Turner is a working professional musician, something Llewyn merely aspires to. Jean is fond of calling Llewyn an "A-hole," as if that's what's holding him back, but clearly being an A-hole will not in itself prevent success. Turner is a perfect example of this (and Jean's kind of an A-Hole herself). No, that's not where Llewyn has to adjust his approach. He has to go for it, which is just what he's currently trying to do in his quiet, unstated way. Circumstances have forced him onto the right path, with Turner exemplifying both what is possible and what not to become. Turner is an incessant antagonistic force, and Llewyn is stuck in a car with him, along with the cipher of coiled tension next to him, so he is deep inside Bad Guys Close In territory – right where and when a story Hero most needs to be.



Antagonism looms in the frame as Bad Guys Close In.

This is a long sequence, almost 15 pages, and it gets progressively weirder as the almost spectral figure of Turner repeatedly disappears into gas station bathrooms for extended periods, spends many miles sleeping and drooling in the back seat, only to rouse and verbally

attack Llewyn with ever greater intensity. Llewyn demonstrates heroic restraint (or is it just characteristic disengagement?) in never taking the bait.

All Is Lost (pages 67/68/69/74/78):

Blake tells us this is where we find the ‘whiff of death,’ and a false defeat. In *Inside Llewyn Davis* we find several such beats right in a row: first, responding to Turner’s interrogation-like questioning, Llewyn reveals he had a partner once, Mike, who “threw himself off the George Washington Bridge.” This is a huge revelation and helps us understand Llewyn’s seeming overreaction to Lillian singing Mike’s part at the Midpoint, and his current state of mind in general. In addition to all his other troubles, Llewyn is mourning the loss of a dear (perhaps best) friend who has committed suicide. This particular whiff of death colors all we have seen thus far. Secondly, Turner’s reaction is another attack, not just on Llewyn and folk music (Turner plays jazz), but also on Mike. This straw snaps Llewyn’s back and he marshals his first counterattack in defense of himself and his friend, though it is characteristically low-key, even cool: “Mr. Turner, I’m wondering... would that cane fit all the way up your ass or would a little bit stay sticking out?” But Turner is irrepressibly combative, so he attacks yet again, in effect threatening a voodoo curse, implying that Llewyn will have a life of failure, all thanks to him (Turner) – because Llewyn dared to talk back. This whiff of death forebodes abject and inescapable failure. Third, at their next stop, Llewyn finds Turner sprawled on the floor of a bathroom stall with a rubber tourniquet around his arm, apparently dead from a heroin overdose (so that’s what he was doing at all those bathroom stops!). But Johnny Five says he’s fine and the two dump Turner, still alive, into the back seat of the car and continue on their way. Until further down the road Johnny Five is dragged away by a highway patrolman leaving Llewyn, Turner and the female cat (Llewyn had taken her with him – yet again trying to STC!) abandoned on the side of the road a couple hours from Chicago in the freezing rain with no car keys.

Blake describes the Fun & Games section as The Promise of the Premise, meaning a sequence that delivers the most ‘fun’ in a positive sense, that also suggests a potential positive outcome for the Hero. It is a best case scenario, and in this film that’s when Llewyn is shown making money doing what he does best – playing music. Blake also pointed out that the All Is Lost beat can be seen as its opposite: the Fun & Games of the worst case scenario where the Hero must pursue his quest against seemingly insuperable odds, and where the authors – with gleeful perversity – subject the Hero to the most plausibly outrageous misfortune possible. That’s exactly what the Coens are up to here, in a manner perfectly suited to this story context.

If this were a superhero movie, then this is where the protagonist would be imprisoned (the false defeat) only to super-heroically effect his escape. Here, Llewyn is also in a kind of prison, and he super-heroically decides to venture out into the cold on foot, with his guitar and no winter coat, to make it to Oz, aka Chicago. Of course, given Llewyn’s scant resources, this means abandoning Turner and the cat. Turner, in a drug-induced stupor in the back seat, probably deserves it. And will no doubt survive. But the cat, the one Llewyn picked up on the street outside Café Reggio in NYC and brought with him – does she deserve it? And will she survive? All open to question. And then there’s Turner’s curse, a portend of doom... but Llewyn is a man on a mission and pursues his quest.

Dark Night of the Soul (page 86/89 – 90):

After suffering through another sleepless night, waterlogged shoes, a black coffee breakfast and harassment by a train station security guard, Llewyn makes it to the Gate of Horn (metaphor, anyone?), Bud Grossman's club. When Bud shows up, Llewyn learns that Bud never received a copy of Llewyn's album, apparently never sent by Mel. Here Llewyn finally voices his intentions, and his ambition, in one terse line: "Well, I'm interested in gigging here but also in obtaining management—" There, it's said. This is what he has wanted all along, even from before the movie actually began. Bud is game to hear what Llewyn has to offer, so Llewyn pulls out his guitar and prepares to sing the most important song he is likely to sing in his life. The choice of song is crucial, but it apparently takes Llewyn unawares. Jean, Jim or Troy would have most likely spent the entire trip to Chicago ruminating over what song might show them in the very best light, but not Llewyn. He must choose spontaneously and he falls back on his own sensibility, his purist ideals. A fateful choice. He sings another dirge of pain and sorrow. A folk song's folk song. Hardly a commercial choice. Bud's pronouncement is matter-of-fact: "I don't see a lot of money here." So it's over. Just like that. "You're no front guy," Bud tells him, "but your voice might fit in a trio I'm putting together." Llewyn declines the offer, revealing that he had a partner once. Bud responds, "Uh-huh, well that makes sense. My suggestion? Get back together." A horrendously ironic statement. Bud basically just told Llewyn to kill himself, albeit unknowingly. Llewyn, ever the cool cat, gives nothing away: "That's good advice. Thank you, Mr. Grossman." Devastating.



Dark Night of the Song: "I don't see a lot of money here."

Llewyn's Dark Night isn't over. He hitchhikes back to NY and gets picked up by a college student who needs to sleep, putting Llewyn at the wheel on a snowy, windy night. He sees a turnoff for Akron, Ohio – where his former girlfriend lives with his two-year old child he has never met. As the literal dark (and stormy) night presses in upon him like a shroud of uncertainty and despair, a small animal bangs across the front of the car. He stops to spy a small creature, looking suspiciously like a cat (the cat from NY, having super-heroically

escaped from the car?) limping into the woods. Llewyn has quite possibly, quite literally, killed the cat (for real this time), just as his own dream (even the one he didn't really want – a life with the former girlfriend) dies.

Break into Three (pages 91 – 108):

Llewyn wakes up in his nephew's bed at his sister's house in Queens. Regressing to childhood, a kind of rebirth. And he's made a decision. Blake describes the Dark Night of the Soul beat as the moment where the Hero loses all hope, where the loss of the dream, the goal, dies. It is a moment of acceptance and surrender that allows the Hero a Moment of Clarity. Sometimes the Moment of Clarity empowers the Hero to continue pursuing the same goal with a fresh approach and renewed energy, but sometimes it empowers the Hero to switch goals entirely. Llewyn switches goals. His new quest is to reactivate his merchant marine status and ship out. But this process, in classic Coen Brothers fashion, is a comedy of errors, a Sisyphusian struggle. He owes back union dues, and paying them off cleans him out ("I'm leaving naked, man. Clean start." – more rebirth imagery, in dialogue this time). Then he goes to visit his Dad, who is more or less catatonic, due to Alzheimer's or something like it. In a last bid to connect, Llewyn plays him a song he used to sing as a child, and afterwards, just for a moment, it appears that Dad seems to remember it, and appreciate it, this gift of song, his own Moment of Clarity. Llewyn is touched, until he realizes his Dad has soiled himself, and the man's Moment of Clarity was probably nothing more than a loosened bowel. As Jean said, everything Llewyn touches "turns to sh!t." Here again, the conception is made literal.

A and B Stories cross when Llewyn goes to collect his stuff from Jim and Jean's and Jean shows him one kindness: she has arranged for him to play at a local club the night some important critics are attending. He thanks her, but confesses that he's done, he's out. He's bidding farewell to folk music. He also tells her that he loves her, apparently the reason why he endured her nastiness without complaint. "Oh come on" she says with a laugh. An arrow in the heart.

Llewyn then discovers he can't ship out without his seaman's papers, and subsequently discovers that his sister, misunderstanding his instructions, threw out a box of his stuff that contained them. Since he doesn't have any money left to buy new ones he can't ship out. He can't cut and run. He can't escape. He's trapped, mired in *Stasis = Death*. Oy!

He drowns his sorrows at the club we first saw him play at, as earnest, chirpy folk songs play behind him. The club owner reveals to Llewyn that if a woman wants to play at his club, then they have to sleep with him, Jean included. Since we've already seen Jean perform here, we can surmise this is a bridge she willingly crossed, ends justifying means. Furthermore, the club owner might just as easily be responsible for her pregnancy, yet Jean approached Llewyn to pay for it. Another shot below the belt. Overwhelmed with bitterness and rage, Llewyn takes it out on the nearest victim, a middle-aged country bumpkin on stage with an autoharp. He viciously heckles this poor, defenseless woman, and gets ejected from the club, screaming "I hate folk music!" He denounces his passion and one true devotion. Authorial Fun & Games of the most remorseless kind.

With nowhere else to go, he returns to the Gorfeins, tail between his legs. And like a cat in the rain, he's taken in by them, everything forgiven. They even allow him to stay the night. A and

B stories cross again (remember the cat is one of two B stories) as it's revealed their cat has turned up, making his own incredible journey uptown, and home. Just like his namesake, 'Ulysses.' Miracles happen. And cats have nine lives.

Finale (pages 109 – 112):

On this hopeful note, we transition to Llewyn awaking to the cat jumping onto his chest, the very thing that had happened on page 4. Is time repeating? No, because Llewyn makes it out the door this time, the cat safely inside. A difference, and progress of sorts.

The story comes full circle when we next find Llewyn on stage at the club, singing "I've Been All Around This World," as we had on page 1, and we understand that movie time has caught up with itself. The opening scenes were a flash forward to the Finale, all else until now having been flashback. Blake points out that an essential component of any Finale is the presence of 'Convergence and Synthesis,' and the Coens follow that dictum to a tee as we converge back through time to scenes we have already seen, now with the synthesis of knowing all that came before.



Dramatic Questions answered at the "Fare Thee Well" Finale.

There is new information, too: we see Llewyn sing an additional song, one he had recorded with Mike: "Dink's Song/Fare Thee Well," a fitting number with which to take his leave from the stage, as it's not a tragic dirge, but speaks of love and regret with tender sadness. He sings it beautifully. Then the club owner tells him about the man in a suit waiting for him out back, and now we, as well as Llewyn, remember the music critic Jean had mentioned. Could that be the man waiting for him? Could Llewyn be on the cusp of breaking his downward spiral of failure the very moment he has chosen to give it all up? Will there be meaningful Transformation?

Well, yes, there will be Transformation, just not for Llewyn. As our Hero crosses to the back door, a young man takes the stage, a man wearing “a Dutch-boy cap and a guitar and a harmonica rack.” The script specifies that he sings “I Was Young When I Left Home,” and further specifies that it’s a young Bob Dylan. I’m no music historian, but I do know, like most of us, that Bob Dylan ‘transformed’ folk music, suddenly making it commercial and popular, and went on to become a superstar. I’m guessing this is what he sang the night he was discovered, which is the moment that bookends the tale of poor Llewyn Davis.

As Dylan sings, Llewyn meets the man in the suit, who turns out to be the husband of the woman he had heckled the night before. This man gives Llewyn a beating, the sequence that opened the film, and now the dramatic question regarding why is answered for us. Despite his talent, Llewyn is not discovered by the music industry this night. The man hovering over him like an angel of retribution makes sure of that, however unintentionally.

Closing Image (page 113):

Llewyn watches the man climb into a cab and drive away. Laying in the alley, holding his gut, Llewyn salutes the man in the cab, murmuring “Au revoir” – as if he knows him to be a living embodiment of misfortune, perhaps the curse of Roland Turner made flesh, that Llewyn is destined to meet again, and again, and again... in his nine lives of suffering, his existence as an obscure, undiscovered folk song. Oh, hang me!

Personal Thoughts:

To the most basic question first: do the worlds of Blake Snyder and the Coen Brothers intersect? Well, given the conspicuous presence of the cat, and the fact that its literal saving is front and center, and also connects to the primary themes of the movie (even standing in for the Hero himself), I suggest this is pretty much the apotheosis of Save the Cat movies – which makes me wonder if the Coens, in their mischievous way, are consciously riffing on Blake, another level to their Fun & Games? If that’s what’s going on (and I wouldn’t be a bit surprised), then I think Blake is taking this as the highest compliment. However, it may be, to paraphrase Freud, that “sometimes a cat is... just a cat,” and symbolism is neither intended nor conscious. Fine. I can accept that. Though I personally don’t agree, the beauty is the cat has so many functions on the story level that thematic application or intention hardly matters.

As for the next question, does *Inside Llewyn Davis* follow the BS2, that answer is easy. Of course. Beat for beat. Sure, it stretches the page numbers a bit on two key sequences – a prolonged Debate and a late Break into Two, but those beats are still there, in the proper order, functioning exactly as Blake said they should. Everything else is textbook perfect. To my mind it’s a testament to the flexibility of the template, and how writers and artists can bend it to their will. And as I have pointed out, those two structural anomalies are not arbitrary, lazy or done in ignorance, but stem organically from the Hero’s character.

Does a BS2 analysis shed light on the film? Does it deepen our understanding and appreciation for it? As for me, I’m from the small band of folks that actually loved it coming out of the theater, though I wasn’t aware of all the reasons why. That took more rigorous examination, something the film totally deserves. I think more highly of it now than ever. This film is the work of modern American masters employing all their cinematic arts to tell a

story by, for and about artists. It is a classic art film. An art film's art film. Yeah, I see a lot of art here. And by the way, it's also hilarious, in its muted, low-key way. Like most everything else about this film, it's subtle (even when it's being literal, as it so often is). Like Llewyn himself, the Coens want the audience to come to them. Even *they* – the filmmakers – are catlike.

Which brings me to the last question: why has it performed so poorly? Given its (more or less) classic structure, why is it being ignored by all but a few critics and die-hard fans? Well, to be accurate, most critics love it. But why not audiences?

I'll venture an opinion: Llewyn, that's why. And I don't mean Oscar Isaac, who I think is brilliant and gives a brave, pitch-perfect performance (and boy, can that man sing!). No, it's the character. In depicting the life of a performer who fails to connect with audiences, and trying to answer that question as thoroughly, thoughtfully and plausibly as possible, the Coens have written themselves into a corner. The very thing that prevents the character from connecting to audiences in the story world is what prevents the character from connecting to movie-going audiences. We could write a list: he's too passive, too remote, not charming enough, funny enough, warm enough, sexy enough, dynamic enough. And he fails to save the cat! Any of them! I can hear the studio notes now. However, had Llewyn been more outgoing, more proactive, more on-purpose, funnier, warmer, sexier, more charismatic, more ingratiating, more ambitious – in a word, more *likable* – well then, he would have been a success. He would have brought about Act II on page 30! He would have been... Bob Dylan! But that's not the guy the Coens were making a movie about. They were showing what happened to the guy who *paved the way for* Dylan, and when Dylan got his shot, our Hero was busy getting the sh!t kicked out of him. In *Coenland*.

There is a related reason audiences may be keeping their distance: this story is unremittingly sad, even bleak, almost Kubrickian in its coldness, which may be why all those grays, blues and browns follow Llewyn around like Pig Pen's dust cloud. Of course, it is about folk music, a tradition (like the blues) with an emphasis on tragedy. Joel and Ethan Coen took their most basic cue from the subject matter itself, and not only did they write and direct the definitive movie about this particular milieu, they may have made the definitive movie about the ephemeral and random nature of success. A pitying ode to the also-rans. A cautionary tale to anyone drawn to the spotlight. Its form admirably expressing function. But is it... commercial? Can something this depressing, no matter how artfully rendered, find a mainstream audience? Do you see a lot of money here?

Regardless, this film is, for me, unquestionably 'greater Coen Brothers' – the Coen Brothers at their most artful, while also at their most impudently uncommercial (how Llewyn Davis-ish!). But there was no way around that. It just goes with the territory.

The cat can't always be saved.