

Norman mailer: a quest for the archetypes: a study of his major fiction

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This analysis traces the development of select American fiction highlighting the post-war writers particularly related to Norman Mailer. Emphasis is laid on a quest for the archetypal emotions connected with war, power, power through politics and power through sex.

Methods: The analysis of a quest for the archetypes of Norman Mailer's major fiction was examined especially related to the contemporary American society. This study takes into account Norman Mailer's background as a writer, his special contribution to the genre of the novels and his place in the history of ideas of his own time in assessing the permanent value of his creative fiction.

Findings: The quest for power through war and sex is examined in *The Naked and the Dead*. The power through politics in *Barbary Shore* is also analyzed. The quest for power through sex is studied in *The Deer Park* and in *An American Dream* in detail. It also explores Mailer's techniques of narration, style, characterization and the influences in fixing Mailer's pre-occupation with the archetypal of emotions of society especially Twentieth Century American society.

Keywords: Quest, archetypal emotions - war, power, politics and sex American Contemporary society, existentialism, genre, techniques, study, analysis.

1. Introduction:

Norman Mailer more than any other American writer of the mid-twentieth century appears to be the most representative American. All the contradictions and complexities, the crudities and the exaltation, the bestiality and the saintliness are all found in an abundant measure in Norman Mailer himself and his character in his major novels [1]. It is a critical commonplace that no writer could escape being a mouthpiece of and an interpreter for the society that breeds him. Mailer has more than once confessed that he was deeply indebted to Hemingway, E.M.Forster and D.H. Lawrence.

Mailer took to novel because he intuitively realized that it was the novelist who could present the true history of the human race. Robert Ehrlich has emphasized the importance of emotions in the novels of Norman Mailer: "He is especially interested in the complexity of emotional life"[2].

2. Norman Mailer:

Norman Mailer was befriended by great personalities like John Kennedy, Marilyn Munroe, Henry Miller, Arthur Miller, Noam Chomsky and Jean Malaquais. Hence Norman Mailer was a power to reckon with. Mailer's Jewish birth, strict religious upbringing, the liberal education at Harvard, the first hand experience of the Second World War, his personal knowledge of Eisenhower and Kennedy-all these contributed to the fascinating nature of Norman Mailer's personality.

This analysis takes into account Norman Mailer's background as a writer, his special contribution to the genre of the novels and his place in the history of ideas of his own time in assessing the permanent value of his creative fiction. Norman Mailer's contribution literature was quite sizeable. He wrote fiction as well as a lot of non-fiction. But Norman Mailer himself laid great emphasis on the novels as most important and the most difficult art form. Mailer says in an interview: "...it (novel) is the most difficult of all the forms I have tried." [3]

This study has made an attempt to dive below the stormy sea of action and muddled whirlpool of motives and sentiments In order to bring out a consistent and coherent view of his fiction as the outcome of the interplay of certain archetypal passion in human life. These archetypal passions are actually the instinctive quests of man. These quests were for war, power, politics and sex.

3. Quest for war:

Mailer utilizes war only as background to his internal themes of identity, humanity and man. In this connection Stanley T. Gutman says: "The main idea of human life is a continual struggle... war, nothing but war." [4]

Mailer presents the bestial qualities in man. He actually gives the moral responsibility and right to kill his enemies. Brutal murders committed in war are not crimes before law or even God. He also stresses that every man has in him both qualities of a 'beast' and that of a 'seer'. Donald Kaufmann observes: "Mailer's narrative accents the negative demonstrating characters of drifting from 'seer' to 'beast'." [5]

The meaning and archetypes of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a parable about contemporary American society would be more clearly in the words of Philip H. Buftis says: "The parable is clear. The hunting party is the American military in miniature, replete with commanders and their *G*/subordinates. The crazed animals being annihilated by aerial machines are the people of Vietnam attacked by the Air Force. But such equations do little to help us understand the art or the real ideational power of this book." [6] Mailer suggests that one cannot escape violence, because it is rooted in nature of human life. However Mailer argues that man could decide the forms of expression which this violence would take.

Barry H. Leeds comes to a sensible and acceptable conclusion about the relative merit of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* "It is my contention that *An American Dream* is a more commendable and significant novel than any other Mailer has yet written, including *The Naked and the Dead*. In it, narrative techniques, metaphorical patterns and a highly personal existential vision are integrally combined to effect an artistic statement which is exceedingly relevant to the life of every thinking American. It is lack of such integration upon which the failure of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Ultimately rests." [7]

4. Quest for power:

The Naked and the Dead is an exploration of man's quest for archetypal power. In this novel Mailer delineates the characters differences-emotional, geographic, social, economic, because he intends to constitute a microcosmic portrait of the American people. It is interesting that Norman Mailer seems to consider the archetypal quests as a never ending process.

In [8] Norman Mailer, a novelist's concern was chiefly with the men and women who lived through his novel. The kind of life they live constitutes naturally the writer's vision of particular representative of humanity. A Sergeant Croft, a General Cummings, a Lieutenant Hearn, an O'Shaughnessy, an Eitel and a Rojack were all representative human beings. Their immediate environment might be modern American society; but nature of their basic emotions, desires, ambitions, weaknesses and strengths were all truly representative of human race in general.

The novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, as a literary form about man – sinful, murderous, inhuman and evil, mostly seeks redemption and who desires to endure against all forces, his own as well as the outside, natural forces. The great value of Mailer's achievement is that he revealed to age – old human tensions – the struggle between animal desire and authority in the essential pattern of power, gravity and veracity never seen in the American novel. The aim of the analysis is to bring to light a basic motive in each one of Mailer's novels. Stanley T. Gutman beautifully states this belief in his work. Mailer is very much interested in power and its manifestations. Power to him is fascinating because it is unrepressed, it is elemental and archetypal.

5. Quest for politics:

The impact on the field of politics in *Barbary Shore* is beautifully presented through long discussions between McLeod and Hollingsworth, Lovett and McLeod. John Stark considers *Barbary Shore* as a contemporary political allegory. In this connection Stark observes: "In the political allegory... Hollingsworth represents the Capitalist State; Lennie and Lovett, Trotskyism; and McLeod, Bolshevism. They all woo Guinevere who represents the masses. The changing alliances and rivalries, the successes and failures in the novel allegorically present a capsule history of the Left, and the characterization implies Mailer's political beliefs." [9]

Even writing a political novel Mailer does not forget to emphasize the importance of art and writing in a man's life. The irony is that neither politics, nor sex, nor writing, is quite satisfying in contemporary American society. This point is emphasized by John Stark: "... in *Barbary Shore* writing is no more satisfying or meaningful than is sex." [10]

Mailer claims that *Barbary Shore* is America's first existential novel, but Lovett does not engage in the primary existential act of creating his own ethical values from an unvarnished and deeply felt experience of the world. Mailer treats the effect of the Russian Revolution in two broad sections – first its impact of politics and second its impact on the individuals. The impact on the field of politics in *Barbary Shore* is beautifully presented through long discussions between McLeod and Hollingsworth, Lovett and McLeod.

The power through political maneuvering is the archetypal passion in every human being and Mailer emphasizes this archetypal quest in one form or another in all the characters in *Barbary Shore*.

6. Quest for sex:

Mailer's obsession with sex led him as a novelist to take the view that a man's sex life and its nature decide a man's attitude to life, his character, his philosophy and the nature of his interaction with other men. The 'Time Machine' segments in *The Naked and the Dead* apart from being a novel technique, are socio-sexual studies of the character concerned. It is Mailer's sexual diagnosis of each character that adds an interesting dimension to the characterization. For him sex is primeval, as old as creation. It is in fact one of the archetypal passions of human life.

A true understanding of sex according to Mailer could be revealed only to an artist and the artist who very nearly comes to realize the true meaning of sex is Rojack in *An American Dream*. In *The Deer Park*, the Hollywood background, the theme of sex becomes all the more powerful. Mailer stresses the point that Desert D' Or is *The Deer Park* of the film stars or the new American aristocracy.

Man as a social being is conditioned by power and politics of the society to which he belongs. Thus Mailer views human life as a massive force, a compound of the four archetypal passions—war, power, politics and sex.

In an interview Mailer confessed that he was aware of the great responsibilities of a novelist: "I write because I want to reach people and by reaching them, influence the history of my time a little bit." [11]

7. Conclusion:

Mailer's major novels do not provide mere entertainment only. Through his work Mailer makes us think and understand our predicament as citizens of a post-war world in which anarchy is a rule of human life. Once Mailer was asked what his main ambition was and replied quickly to be a real writer. Mailer is undoubtedly and undeniably a great writer today who brings out social awareness for futuristic developments.

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