

Norman Mailer as a Social Critic:
The Naked and the Dead

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Norman Mailer ((January 31, 1923 – November 10, 2007)

Courtesy: https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Mailer

Abstract

This article lays focus on a social critic named Norman Mailer who criticizing the cultural deviations in the contemporary American society in his work. *The Naked and the Dead*, which represents the conflict between mechanistic forces of system and individual integrity and explore the condition of man struggling against the depersonalization forces of modern society Mailer is deeply concerned with the relationship between American institutions and inner lives of the people and his works depicts the loss of human values in the content of a war experience and in extension the American society.

Key words: Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, Social Critic, Cultural deviations, depersonalization, subjugation, virtual explosion, materialism.

Norman Mailer, who is considered as one of the distinguished postwar American writers, stands unique as a social critic endowed with the literary skill and critical acumen to point out and criticise the deteriorating standards of present day American life. Robert Ehrlich rightly observes:

“Perhaps no other American writer since World War II has been as concerned with the quality of American life as Norman Mailer Mailer has detailed his attitudes towards his country in an ever developing syncretic vision which has required continual aesthetic experimentation ...” (P1)

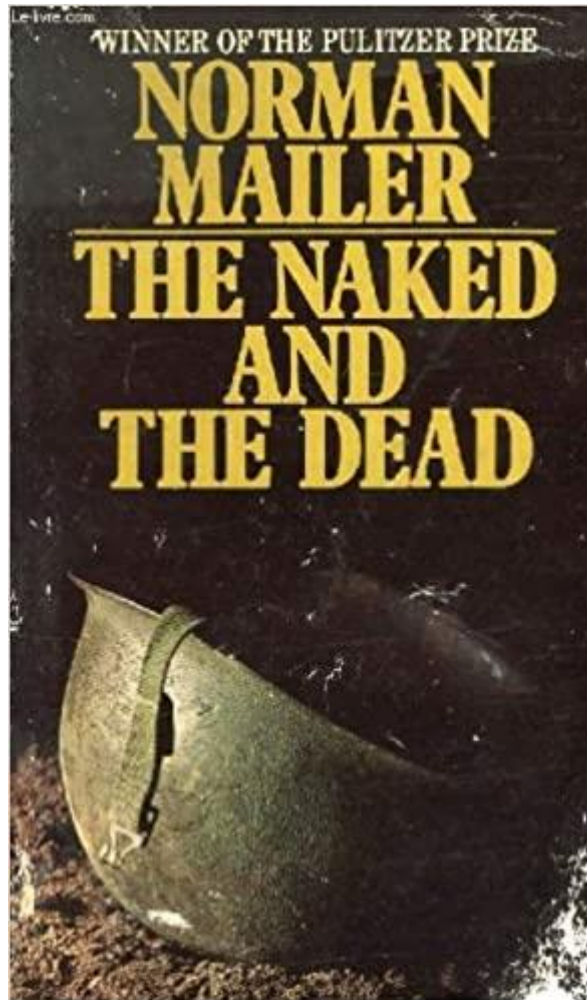
Norman Mailer belonged to the group of post second world war novelists. First World War and Second World War novelists were found to be writing about war but there was an essential difference in handling of the war theme. The first world war novelists “never saw war as the inevitable extension of society” (Kazin 75) but treated it totally as an experience outside civilized life. Mailer is indebted to the first world war writers like Dos Possos and Hemingway in matters of narrative technique and handling of the war theme. Mailer himself admits thus:

“.... in those sixty days I read and reread *Studs Longinan, U.S.A.* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Later I would add wolfe and Hemingway And Faulkner and to a small measure, Fitzgerald, but Farrell, Dos Possos and Steinbeck were the novel for me....” (P 25).

In the post-Second World War period, with the growth of mass society, a conflict in varying degrees, between the requirements of self and the demands of the society assumed alarming proportions. Mailer was much pained to see that the modern society does not offer a congenial atmosphere for the growth of individual liberty. On the other hand, he witnessed the diminishing emphasis on individual choice. He was afraid that modern democratic man is about to yield his dignity, his freedom and his manhood before the onslaught of political reactions.

As a leading social critic of the Post-war American culture, Mailer has, many times in the past, reacted vehemently against attempts at cultural deviations in the contemporary American society. In short, his heart has invariably been linked through a connecting chord with every tone and vibration of the modern American psyche. As Mailer has always considered writing as performance, he has fearlessly exposed all that is rotten in America. Though Mailer himself admitted that he is highly indebted to the First World War writers like Dos Possos and Hemingway in matters of narrative technique and handling of the war theme, it should not be wrongly understood that Mailer did not have anything original to offer and that his novel was merely a derivative of an earlier work. Of course, Mailer borrowed from

the writers of the twenties, yet he had always made a conscious effort to make the work his own.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/naked-Dead-Norman-Mailer/dp/B000Q9ND00/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=The+Naked+and+the+Dead&qid=1584617953&s=b&sr=1-3

Mailer shot into prominence even with his first novel *The Naked and the Dead*. The success was so sudden and immense that Mailer found it difficult to cope with the newly gained popularity. Hence, the period that followed his first novel was one of experimentation. His next two novels proved to be dismal failures. Yet, Mailer put up a heroic battle against the critical quarters and could successfully carve a niche for him in American literature. His merit was subsequently recognised and he was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. The post-war American society witnessed the virtual explosion of industries. The industrial society brought all physical comforts and proved to be 'Utopian'. Yet this Utopian society became demonic as it demanded the subjugation of the individual will to that the centre. As a result, the material concerns enjoyed a predominance over the spiritual needs. Though the American youth initially became a co-operative victim of the mass society, he got frustrated and eventually longed for individual freedom.

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Modern man has become a co-operative victim of a mass society. America as a nation has started to view production as an end in itself. This is a moralistic stance of the nation has helped the victory of material dreams over non-material. Modern man has lost the discriminating power to identify what is good for the spiritual welfare of his self. Ultimately he has let himself be mass-produced just like any other consumer commodity. Irving Howe points out the dominant symptoms of a mass society thus:

“Passivity becomes a widespread social attitude: the feeling that life is a drift over which one has little control and that even when men do, have shared autonomous opinions they cannot act them out in common.

.....

Disagreement, controversy, polemic are felt to be in bad taste.....

The era of causes, good or bad comes to an end; strong beliefs seem one chronic.

The pressure of material need visibly decreases. Yet there follows neither a sense of social release not a feeling of personal joy; instead people become increasingly aware of their social dependence and powerlessness” (PP 85-86).

Sordid examples of representatives of the mass society are found in many characters of *The Naked and the Dead*. The individuality of the minor characters is subdued by the dominant characters who hold the power. They are always placed in the fear ladder. The American populace have all physical comfort, but their traditional values have got eroded. This eroding of values forms a prelude to the increased incidence of violence in contemporary culture. Violence is found to be an integral part of American culture and the use of force, as Ronald Berman puts it, is “a sign of sincerity” (P 150). The contemporary American artist has made no effective protest against these manifestations of a deep sickness. The failure of the artist is due to his “infatuation with the economy of abundance” (AM 176).

Norman Mailer sees man as corrupt and confused to the point of helplessness in his *The Naked and the Dead*. He asserts that there are limits beyond which he cannot be pushed and even in his corruption and sickness, there are yearnings for a better world. The central conflict in *The Naked and the Dead* is between the mechanistic forces of the ‘system’ and the will to individual integrity. Commanding General Cummings, brilliant and ruthless evangel of fascist power and control, and iron-handed, hard-nosed Sergeant Craft personify

the machine. Opposing them in the attempt to maintain personal dignity and identity are Cummings' confused young aide, Lieutenant Hearn and Private Valsen, rebellious members of Croft's platoon. Mailer does not bring this conflict to any satisfying end; at the novel's end, Hearn is dead and Valsen's stubborn pride gets defeated but likewise, Croft is beaten and humiliated and Cummings' personal ambition thwarted. But while the resolution of the conflict may be ambiguous, the nature of it is not. The principal burden of the novel is to explore the condition of man struggling against the depersonalization forces of modern society. Through this novel, Mailer has depicted how the society and war play a havoc in the human values of man, who has fallen a prey to the American life and Culture. Randall H. Waldron observes:

“.... Thus we see Cummings' function as symbolic character has crucial implication for the central theme of the novel; that the machine is capable of extending its domination to the most fundamental level of man's existence of becoming a threat to his very nature and to his humanity” (P 77).

Mailer is deeply concerned with the relationship between American institutions and inner lives of the people. “Power in America does not belong to the nine-tenths of the people but is embedded in the management and labour executives, the military and the government hierarchy, the church and the mass communication media” (A.M.180). A pointed attack on the authoritarian or totalitarian attitude of such institutions of power is the main concern in Mailer's writings. *The Naked and the Dead* is fully of its own time in asserting the corruption and death of the liberal and human spirit in American culture. General Cummings, the incarnation of authoritarianism in the *The Naked and the Dead*, is seen as the person who slaughters the 'liberal spirits and humanistic values using the war as his tool.

The Naked and the Dead is in the naturalistic mode. This has been borrowed from Dreiser and Ferrell. In the words of Eisinger, “Dreiser's influence in the book is felt, particularly in the use of chemic compulsions to move the characters and the part chance plays in their lives” (P XII). Mailer has taken pains to make *The Time Machine* section appear an integral part of the novel by introducing them at appropriate places in the development of characters. Mailer makes a comment on the contemporary society through his 'The Time Machine'. Mailer's anxiety is to portray the implications of current history on future. Whereas Dos Possos is merely satisfied with analyzing the nature of the past, “Mailer's novel differs from Dos Possos' trilogy in its use of social elements to clarify a dramatic action, not a social argument” (Merill 31). Some critics hold the view that Dos Possos' *Three Soldiers* “with its contrasting social types and its negative attitude towards the war machine, was the most important influence on Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*” (David 48). John M. Mute also subscribes to this view and makes a comprehensive

comparison of the two works. Though Mailer learnt from his predecessors, he has always had his path of individual development. John M. Muste rightly observes:

“It is probably true that Mailer had the advantage of being in a position to learn from his predecessors, but this is not necessarily a proof that his work was therefore inferior to theirs. We do not downgrade Shakespeare because he learned from Marlowe or Kyd, nor do we denigrate Eliot’s accomplishment because he went to Pound and Donne ...” (P 365)

The period after publication of *The Naked and the Dead* was a period of experimentation for Mailer. He had to tackle the critical quarters which had thronged upon his literary piece. His next two works *Barbary Share* and *The Deer Park* were failures. His humiliating experience with the publication of *The Deer Park* did a serious damage to his self-prestige. Mailer was so much frustrated that he made a remark about the critics “they murder their writers and they decorate their graves” (AM 22). Mailer was modest enough to tell an interviewer,

“I think much better when people who read your book don’t know anything about you, even what you look like” (Rugged Times 25)

Mailer’s self-realisation brought about a change in his conception of the relationship between the artist and his work. He experiences the hard social reality that “without his egotism, no writer is likely to carry much weight” and a writer is not only what he knows himself to be” but “what he constantly fights for” (Kazin 249). In this situation, Mailer declared that “the way to save your work and reach more readers is to advertise yourself” (A.M.21). Mailer changed his outlook which led to the publication of *The White Negro*. Events of national importance such as Negro’s civil rights and political conventions became the theme of his writings. Then came his two novels *An American Dream* and *Why are we in Vietnam?* His *The Armies of the Night* won him the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. After this, Mailer occupied an honourable place in the society. He understood what works for him and what does not.

In the period before World War II Communism looked an attractive alternative for the Americans who were worried with the disintegrating American society and dead values. Mailer was also committed to a liberal leftist position derived from Marxist – Leninist tradition. It was this heritage from the thirties that gave him a basis for his social criticism. The political substance of his novel *The Naked and the Dead* the clash between liberalism

and proto fascism derives from the leftist's view of society and the radical projection of history, largely as those framed in the thirties. The attack that Mailer makes upon American society finds its rationale in corruptions in mind and spirit wrought by decaying capitalism. But the Nazi-Soviet Pact belied all their hopes and announced the death of Marxism in America. The most serious aspect of Mailer's commitment to radicalism in *The Naked and the Dead* lay in the disillusionment with politics and ideology that overtook most intellectuals and writers in forties. "Politics was the God that failed in that time, not communism alone" says Chester E. Eisinger (P x). The liberal left suffered the sharpest rejection because it had promised the most. Mailer wrote *The Naked and the Dead* while this dissolution of belief was going on around him, but he does not seem to have realized until the end that his liberal – left tradition had failed him too.

Though the external theme of *The Naked and the Dead* is war, it has won the uniform critical acclaim as an "effective novel of social protest" (Harper 102). Richard Gilman rightly observes:

".... The chief fascination of *The Naked and the Dead* does not lie in its battle scenes, descriptions of Army life, or evocation of the general flavour of war, the elements that made it a best seller. The most memorable quality it has rests in Mailer's having been able to isolate certain stands of American actuality, the reality that lay, we might say, behind our presence in the war ..." (P 98).

According to Mailer, '*The Naked and the Dead* is not a realistic documentary, it is rather a symbolic book'. In this symbolic design of the book, General Cummings and Sergeant Croff stand for the authoritarian forces. Cummings is assuredly authoritarian in his political theories and conceptions of society. He represents the hot breath of the future through his thoughts, intentions and actions. The theme of man's obsession with power in *The Naked and the Dead* centers on Cummings and Croft. Both men are driven to the pursuit of power by personal and sexual failures easily in their lives and both later compensate for their failures by achieving sexual gratification in the exercise of control over men and matters. As power is a goal in itself, both figures view men as objects to be manipulated – as animals and machines are – for maintenance of power and both realize that manipulation or control requires the cultivation of fear and hate in men for those in power.

To conclude, Mailer's major concern in his novel *The Naked and the Dead* is to show the central conflict between the authoritarian forces of the centre and the will to individual integrity. Towards the end of the novel, Mailer seems to suggest that authoritarianism is a

plague and it leaves no one safe. General Cummings, who considered himself a demi-God, is himself defeated at the end. The victory is brought out by the unimaginative Major suggests that authoritarianism as an institution is more powerful than the individuals and it absorbs everything, even generals into it. Thus, the real concern of Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead* is to portray the loss of human values in the context of a war experience and in extension the American society.

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