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**WAR AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN  
NORMAN MAILER'S THE NAKED AND THE DEAD**

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**Research Article**

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**Abstract:**

The paper casts light on the Norman Mailer's depiction of the individual experience and a view of behaviours and attitudes of man within the framework of the military experience in his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). Mailer tackles these topics in the depiction of the reconnaissance of the American platoon on the Japanese held-island Anopopei in the Second World War (1939-45). In addition to that, the novelist presents different issues as totalitarianism, systemization, the conflict of man and machine and the fragmented society structure of America. Mailer's readers might see the novel as pessimistic; nonetheless, the novelist believes that hope lies in man's strife against the mechanistic forces and struggle for a better world.

**Key words:** The War, Human, Norman Miller.

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## الحربُ والإنسان في العارِ والميت لنورمان ميّلر

إيناس عبد المنعم قدوس محمود<sup>2</sup>

### الملخص

يدرس البحث معالجة نورمان ميّلر، الروائي والمسرحي الأمريكي لقضية مركزية عانى منها الفرد في الحرب العالمية الثانية (1939-45) من خلال تصويره استيلاء فصيلة استطلاع أمريكية لأحد الجزر الفلبينية التي كانت تحت سيطرة اليابان. يجسد الجيش المصور في روايته العارِ والميت صورة مصغرة لنظام الديمقراطية والشمولية في أمريكا والتشظي في تركيب المجتمع الأمريكي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تعرض الدراسة لتصوير المؤلف لتجربة الفرد وتعرض مواقفه وسلوكياته ضمن إطار تجربته في الحرب. يلاحظ قراء ميلر الرؤية التشاؤمية الغالبة على الرواية لكن الكاتب يؤمن أن الأمل في رواية العارِ والميت يكمن في صراع الإنسان ضد قولبة الفرد ومن أجل وطن أفضل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحرب، الإنسان، نورمان ميّلر.

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“A modern democracy is a tyranny whose borders are undefined; one discovers how far one can go only by traveling in a straight line until one is stopped.”

Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers* (1963)  
 At the age of twenty-five, particularly, after the success of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Norman Kingsley Mailer (1923-2007), a twentieth-century US author and journalist, became an international literary figure. Mailer wrote *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955). Widening his scope he began writing essays on contemporary issues and biographical subjects, Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore including Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore and Lee Harvey Oswald. Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore...<sup>1</sup> His other books are *Advertisements for Myself* (1969), a collection of writings that includes the widely read essay “The white Negro” and the novels *Ancient Evenings* (1983) and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984).

In the Second World War (1939-1945), Mailer served in the Philippines with the 112th Cavalry Regiment. He was not involved in much combat and completed his service as a cook, but the experience provided enough material for his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, which is a gritty and realistic novel. It displays hodgepodge styles and influences. Mailer borrows naturalist techniques from James Thomas Farrell, a symbolist's stance from Herman Melville and a journalist's observations from Ernest Hemingway.<sup>2</sup> The story is derived from an actual historical situation of the American platoon's capture of Anopopei, a Japanese-held island in the South Pacific during the Philippines campaign (1944-45) in World War II.<sup>3</sup> The novel focuses on the adventures of a fourteen-man infantry platoon in this mission. In the course of the novel, the men struggle to survive and find meaning in their lives. Moreover, it presents a microcosm of America in the eight men of the reconnaissance platoon: a Texan, a Brooklyn Jew, a Chicago Pole, a Boston

Irishman, a man from the middle west, a Swede, a poor white from the Deep South and a Mexican.<sup>4</sup> Mailer's book gives a picture of individual experience and a view of the behaviour and attitudes of man within the framework of the military experience.<sup>5</sup> There are no conventional battle scenes in the book. One critic suggests that it is really not a war novel as much as it is Mailer's prophetic vision of an

... America that will follow the war, an America divided between the spiritually "naked" who insist upon living life as a romantic quest for ultimate values, and the spiritually "dead" who embrace the Killing blandishments of wealth and power.<sup>6</sup>

The quotation suggests the significance of the title; it clarifies to the reader who is the spiritually naked and who is the spiritually dead. The Naked and the Dead clarifies the function of the machine as the controlling metaphor in World War II novels and the central conflict which is between the mechanistic forces of the system, personified by General Cummings and Sergeant Croft, and the will to individual integrity.<sup>7</sup> On the island of Anopopei Mailer encapsulates the conflict of man with the machine, or the system or fate or indifferent nature and shows that if victory comes, it is the result of coincidence, blunders, even misfortune. Mailer presents the influence of the machine as the "force of anonymous brute mechanism."<sup>8</sup>

Conspicuously, war is different from civilian life; it sets its own world of relationships and sensations. In the novel, men are deformed into mechanical objects by fear and desire for survival. They are in a situation from which there is no escape except to fantasy or to history. Commanders and officers of upper ranks have repressed individual needs and desires. The minds and sensations of their men are set to respond according to their own programming like robots. In other words, "all war experiences ... are essentially the same, all war comparable."<sup>9</sup> This uniformity of war and its experiences, taking into one's consideration the variations in place and time, impart the novel's concern that "manner, not matter, count. Yet manner styles the individual, matter the generali[s]ed area."<sup>10</sup> Mailer insists that he is writing not only about a specific war but about "death and man's creative

urge, fate, [and] man's desire to conquer the elements."<sup>11</sup>

There are three main characters in the novel; the reactionary General Cummings, a coldly calculating machine and Sergeant Sam Croft, his enlisted-man counterpart who finds in killing the satisfaction of his powers and the General's young Harvard-educated aide, Lieutenant Robert Hearn whose wealthy background and aristocratic air are at odds with his tyrannical supervisors as well as the enlisted men.

Lieutenant Robert Hearn is one of the three main figures in the novel through whom Mailer attempts to show the struggle of the individual with the system. Hearn is the character who bridges the gap between the soldiers and the command. Although he represents the liberal voice in the novel and so seems ideally positioned to embody the moral centre in this desperate society, he emerges as a rather vague and empty character, even less sympathetic than Cummings or Croft.<sup>12</sup> Resented by both soldiers and by commanders he is eventually killed for no purpose.

One of the critics maintains that Mailer's naturalistic universe results in "a world in which nobody wins."<sup>13</sup> After the death of Woodrow Wilson—a member of Croft's platoon and a wild man from Georgia who suffers from venereal disease—during the army's agonizing march back to the beach, Oscar Ridges, another member and a good-tempered religious Mississippi farmer, "wept out of bitterness ... [,] longing and despair; he wept from exhaustion ... [,] failure and the shattering naked conviction that nothing mattered."<sup>14</sup>

The rest of the men come to feel this same sense of hopelessness and vulnerability to the forces that are beyond their control. Red Valsen, a wandering labourer from the coal mines of Montana who enlists as a way out of the cycle of poverty and boredom, sees piles of rotten Japanese bodies and notes their overpowering stench which becomes hopeless, "sober and weary" to the forces that are beyond their control. Standing over one of the dead bodies, Private Valsen reflects:

Very deep inside himself he was thinking that this was a man who had once wanted things, and the thought of his own death was always a little unbelievable to him. The man had had a childhood, a youth and a young manhood, and there had been dreams and memories. Red was realizing with surprise and shock, as if he were looking at a corpse for the first time, that a man was really a very fragile thing (p. 524).

He resists authority and often clashes with Croft. His cynicism results from his feeling that “everything is crapped up, everything is phony, everything curdles when you touch it” (p. 526). Valsen and Hearn experience similar feelings about life: Valsen is governed by “a particular blend of pessimism and fatalism,” while Hearn insists that “if you searched something long enough, it always turned to dirt” (p. 526).

In his depiction of the soldiers’ lives back in the United States Mailer criticises the American society. The poverty he suffers in the Depression of 1930s makes Valsen feel old at twenty-three, and causes Polack to grow up in the streets of Chicago. Sergeant Julio Martinez suffers from the prejudice of being a Mexican American which hinders him from flying planes and chooses to be a sergeant instead. Polack admits later that his position, unfortunately, “does not make you white protestant, firm and aloof.”

In the device of the inter-chapters of “The Time Machine” episodes, Mailer has driven from Dos Passos, the novelist delineates the backgrounds and the pre-war lives of the soldiers and equates the structure of the society with the army. America is thus portrayed as

... a place of social privilege and racial discrimination as exploitive and destructive as the military organisation that presents it. Mailer presents the individual as either submitting to these repressive forces or attempting to maintain some spiritual independence.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, in this novel by equating the army with the American society, Mailer explores the fragmented nature of that society and its effect in preventing social development.

The fates of Hearn and Red Vaslen indicate that defiance is fruitless. Mailer uses the issue of WWII as an existential arena for testing men and ultimately man. He expresses his attitude in “The White Negro”:

The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?<sup>16</sup>

In his essay, “A Small Trumpet of Defiance: Politics and the Buried Life in Norman Mailer’s Early Fiction,” Gabriel Miller points out the dominant subject in the novel which is “the relationship between the individual will and a world that attempts to overwhelm and extinguish it.”<sup>19</sup> Connected to this spiritual warfare is the subject of power, particularly political power and the individual’s need to resist the encroaching forces of totalitarianism. Mailer insists that America is “a democracy of systems, not of men.”<sup>17</sup> The novel warns that modern man is in danger of losing his dignity, his freedom, his sense of self before the enormous power of politics and society. *The Naked and the Dead* elaborates the digressing insights of the individual who exemplifies and perpetuates what is wrong with the society he inhabits. In his *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer diagnoses the ideology of totalitarianism as a destructive concept of individuality; the following lines present his idea: “The essence of totalitarianism is that it beheads. It beheads individuality, variety, dissent, extreme possibility ... [and] romantic faith, it blinds vision, deadens instinct, it obliterates the past.”<sup>18</sup>

However, in one of the interviews, Norman Mailer says of his novel:

It has been called a novel without hope. I think actually it is a novel with a great deal of hope. It finds that even in man’s corruption and sickness there are yearnings and inarticulate strivings for a better world, a life with more dignity.<sup>19</sup>

The story of *The Naked and the Dead* is clothed with irony: first the capture of the Anopopei island serves no useful purpose and it is captured as a result of the action of the incompetent Major Dalleson and not of General Cummings' brilliant planning, second at the end the oppressed men become obstinate to the point that they can be oppressed and pushed no further and third the irony of the way in which the men of the platoon turn. Driven by Croft almost to the summit of Mount Anaka, they blunder into a nest of hornets from whose stings they flee in terror down mountain-side, discarding their weapons and equipments as they go, for they suddenly realise that "if they threw away enough possessions they would not be able to continue the patrol." (p. 357) The jungle is a formidable obstacle for the soldiers as they struggle to advance towards the enemy. The oppressive heat and humidity weaken the men's strength as they engage in skirmishes with the Japanese. The climb up of Mount Anaka is completely exhausting; so much so that Red Valsen acknowledges that his health has been ruined and Roth falls to his death. Mount Anaka stands "with its back to the plight of the ants." One critic asserts:

The mountain becomes for Croft what his troops are for Cummings: the "other" that resists his control and must be molded to serve his will. Like Cummings, however, Croft is unable to control the circuits of chance. When he stumbles over a hornets' nest, the men flee down the mountain and the march abruptly ends.<sup>20</sup>

On Anopopei, Sergeant Sam Croft shoots a Japanese prisoner after allowing him to think he is safe, crushes a bird one of his men has found, and coldly plans Hearn's death in an effort to regain control over the platoon. Croft practices violence with enjoyment and kills the Japanese the way a hunter does it. Violence is a way to eliminate his fear of the situation the Japanese have created and sometimes, although unreasonable, he practices thought when threatened. Nature, not men, is what he challenges because he believes he can face men's intimidation while nature presents a challenge. War for



Croft is a means of exercising domination also, in the case of his determination to climb up Anaka, a means of measuring himself against natural forces that are symbolic representations of the forces driving him within.<sup>21</sup> Croft is considered by the men to be “the best platoon sergeant in the Army and the meanest” (p. 212). He is efficient and strong but usually empty and contemptible by nearly all other men. He hates weakness and loves practically nothing. He wants to be himself but he struggles with his anti-self; his fear, weakness and surrender to the unknown and unseen. He is an organization in miniature and, like an organisation, he exploits his soldiers’ fear to manipulate them. Frederick Karl in his *American Fictions* (1983) clarifies that Croft is “a perfect embodiment of the army because men fear him more than they fear death, which is the way an organization can function best.”<sup>22</sup> He loves war for it allows him to unleash at once his hatred and thirst for power. He says: “I HATE EVERYTHING WHICH IS NOT IN MYSELF” (p. 164). Frederick R. Karl compares Croft’s reaction to nature to Hemingway’s characters’ response, but the former lacks charm, sensitivity and fineness. Croft is neither decent nor courageous. He represents a pure embodiment of survival. Mailer concentrates on Croft more than Cummings or Hearn. Obviously, Croft’s ideals: “Survival on any terms” is a main issue in the novel.<sup>23</sup> In addition, survival of the fittest in Croft’s case indicates “the perseverance of the most mechanically brutal.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Croft’s mountaineering masks his own fear and anxiety. On the one hand, his irrational mountaineering camouflages his own fear revealed by the paralysis he suffers during the Japanese attack on the river, and on the other palliates his guilt for killing a Japanese prisoner of war. For instance, when practicing this sport “he would dream of a great wave of water about to fall on him while he lay helpless beneath it .... [I]ntuitively he felt the dream signified some weakness in himself” (p. 444). Mount Anaka, in Croft’s mind, is the mask of his weakness, the central feature in a landscape which he must conquer. He must climb the mountain, not because it is there, but because of

what it motivates within him:

The contest seemed an infinite distance away, and he felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought that the following night they might be on the peak. Again, he felt a crude ecstasy. He could not have given the reason, but the mountain tormented him, beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere (p. 497).

Furthermore, Croft's obsession with Mount Anaka is only one aspect of his system's anonymity by using his fear to align the platoon with his obsession.<sup>25</sup> The fatigue, animosity and terror of the platoon Croft converts into personal energy. He deems himself more force than man, in contrast to Cummings who, according to Hearn's impressions, embodies a system of rationalised logic more than either man or force. The platoon becomes an extension of Croft but his control of them is similar to slavery:

He felt not only the weight of his own body but the weight of all their bodies as effectively as if he had been pulling them in harness. They dragged him back, tugged at his shoulders and his heels. With all his physical exertion his mind fatigued him as greatly, for he was under the acute strain of gauging their limits (p. 699).

Significantly, Croft's quest up Anaka is insincere in comparison with Ahab's quest for Moby-Dick. His portrayal is Mailer's mockery of the demonic self-will. His obsession with Mount Anaka implicates only that the motive and the free will of a systemised man can be designed into him by his system.<sup>26</sup> Croft experiences a military as well as a personal failure and he acquires no self-knowledge other than the "unadmitted" half-formed awareness that the range of his experience, "his hunger," is foreshortened.

Croft is Cummings's executive tool, just as Cummings is the military system's principal instrument of theory. General Cummings is the Commander of the invading American forces on Anopopei and has almost a unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action. He is Mailer's

prototypical commercial man to whom power is morality and manipulation is virtue. He is skilled in regulating the experiences of others into a pattern of his system's plan. He tells Hearn: "The trick is to make yourself an instrument of your own policy. Whether you like it or not, that's the highest effectiveness man has achieved" (p. 82). An ambitious fascist, he believes that totalitarianism is preferable to communism because "it's grounded firmly in men's actual natures" (p. 238).

In the novel the term "totalitarianism" signifies any political and social structure based on systematization at any cost to the individual's autonomy and experiences. The "power-hungry systemi[s]ers" prescribe experience by manipulating the individual's comprehension of the natural and social aspects of his world. The examples of systemization in Mailer's novel are military statisticians, political office-holders and corporate executives. On the one hand, the novelist's conviction is that the individual, not any social system, is the essential microcosm. The totally systematised society, the machined macrocosm, must crush the individual or swallow him into its constituency. On the other hand, the rulers of such a systematised society consider the individual as a minor system to be integrated or displaced and replaced.<sup>27</sup>

He insists that "there's never a man who can swear to his own innocence. We're all guilty, that's the truth" (p. 323). To attain victory he breaks his men's spirits. The "only morality of the future," he tells Lieutenant Hearn,

... is a power morality, and a man who cannot find his adjustment to it is doomed. There is one thing about power. It can flow only from the top down. When there are little surges of resistance at the middle levels, it merely calls for more power to be directed downward, to burn it out.... You can consider the Army as a preview of the future (p. 324).

Mailer emphasises that "totalitarianism is better understood if it is regarded as a plague rather than examined as a style of ideology."<sup>28</sup> Those who adopt it are portrayed as enemies and as the agents of destruction like Cummings

and Croft; both are isolated by their power.<sup>29</sup> What Mailer says of Cummings ironically extends to the novel itself. His dedication to systemization makes him faceless, as Hearn reflects: “There was a certain vacancy in his face, like the vacancy of actors who play American congressmen” (p. 81). Hearn recalls Cummings during a press interview and notices his several personality disguises:

For the reporter, he had been the Professor as he had been The General, The Statesman, The Philosopher to any number of different men. Each of these poses had been a baffling mixture of the genuine and the sham, as if the General instinctively assumed the one which pleased him at the moment, but beyond that was driven on, was handed a personality garment by the unique urges that drove him (p. 81).

Cummings’ indifference to the importance of his own identity suggests his invisible motive to systematise. Ultimately, Cummings believes that the individual identity is subservient to an interconnected society running on unseen power. He thinks that upon the ideal of systemization man establishes a society which is a model of nature and which requires “ ‘a political organization to make it possible’ ” (p. 322). Such subservience must lead the “system monger” finally to “dissolution of self, a correlative status between the natural and the manufactured, the organic and the mechanical, the evolutionary and the developmental.”<sup>30</sup> In *The Naked and the Dead*, Cummings seeks external power to regulate society and thereby control man through mechanistic, external systems such as the military and politics. Cummings sets a text for his Lieutenant telling him that “to make yourself an instrument of your own policy” is “the highest effectiveness man has achieved” (p. 82). When Hearn is dead and the General considers his campaign as a “botch,” he realises that he has no role in the campaign’s victory:

For a moment he almost admitted that he had had very little or perhaps nothing at all to do with this victory, or indeed any victory—it had been accomplished by a random play of vulgar good luck larded in to a casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend. He allowed himself this thought, brought

it almost to the point of words and then forced it back. But it caused him a deep depression (p. 452).

Robert Hearn accuses him of being reactionary but the General dismisses the charge, claiming that the war is not being fought for ideals but for “power concentration.” The role of the annihilating systemiser sits well on Cummings. He may salvage a totalitarian peace out of war. Mailer depicts him as a power-mongering “reagent” seeking a sense of power through controlled annihilation. He employs the confusions of war, the chaos of death and annihilation to his own benefit. His frustration at the security of the bivouac and his fear of Hearn’s rebellion incite him to plan his death. Cummings’s form is his command, literally “the machine of the army-society which operates at his bidding.”<sup>31</sup> The resulting death and destruction quietens but does not satiate his unconscious urge for chaos. Here is one of Mailer’s ironies; the systemiser finds order in chaos and annihilation.

Cummings remains a thing of the system. His delusion, “You could always find a pattern if you looked for it” (p. 401), is a fundamental one to totalitarians. He boasts: “ ‘Chess is inexhaustible. What a concentration of life it really is’ ” (p. 180). With this frame of reference, Cummings is the system’s king and Croft is Cummings’s pawn. Cummings plays the god and his mission on the island discloses his oppressive character; Anopei is his “trial cosmos” and the troops are his worshippers. He practices his “mechanical divinity” on them, oppresses and crushes them into his orders.<sup>32</sup> There he fires an artillery shell; an explosion that ends in “moments of complete and primordial terror” (p. 565). The firing of the shell is one of the instances of Cummings confirmation of power and domination.

Ultimately, the novel imparts that systemisers have the will to enforce their narratives and their metaphors, the automations and the organizations. The systemisers intend to condition and control the individual. Mailer’s antagonists defy the systemization of the world. Although the end is death to Hearn, but Mailer seems to say that hope for the individual to maintain his

self-autonomy lies in defiance. If it does not succeed in tangible victory, it urges the individual to defend his own individuality.

**Conclusion:**

Norman Mailer is one of the postmodern writers who write in a dehumanised and a dehumanising world. He believes that no matter how powerful the system is, man's will is stronger. He rejects robot-like characters whose aim is to systematise life and people and deny man's consciousness, individuality and will. *The Naked and the Dead* presents a view and attitude of man within the framework of military experience. It conveys the effect of technology as a force of destruction and mirrors the twentieth century conflict between mechanistic systemisers who aim at manipulating the individual and man's will. Although it is a war novel, it goes beyond by offering a prophetic vision of America as spiritually dead. Mailer asserts that although his novel delineates a pessimistic world, it shows hope in man's struggle for integrity and a better world.

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