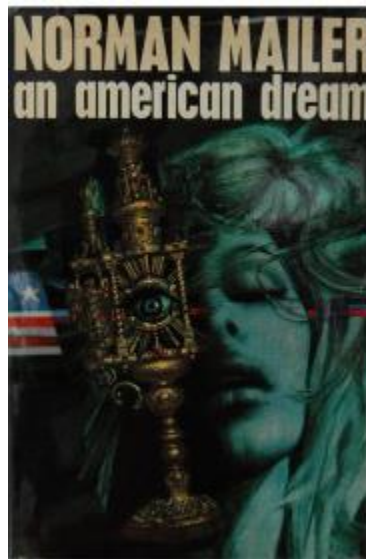


Creative Versus Destructive Powers in Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*

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Abstract

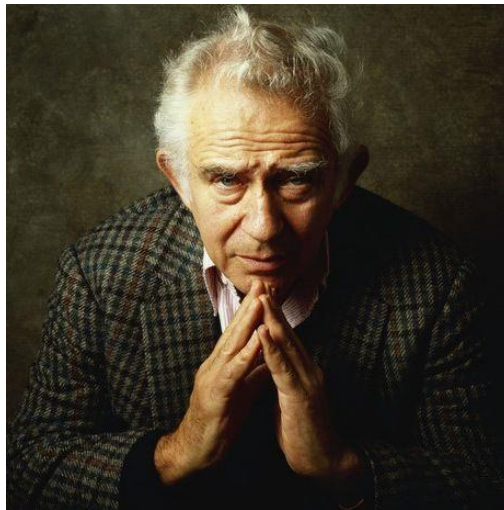
Norman Mailer occupies a position of distinction and eminence in modern American fiction. The basic concern in his work is to provide great psychological depth to the portrayal of social reality and to depict dramatically important social issues. He is the projector of cultural heritage. He depicts the inherent dignity and reasoning capacities of all human beings. He used novel as a vehicle for conveying his understanding of the contemporary world. In this paper, social justice, moral stability, ethical standards, political awareness and humanism are analyzed.

Key words: Norman Mailer, American Dream, cultural heritage

Introduction

Mailer has positively presented his human concern through effective themes. Two major themes can be perceived in all of Mailer's fiction. They are social ills and the plight of an individual in contemporary society. Though the themes are universal, Mailer differs from others in perspective, in responding to the helplessness of an individual society. His writing is concerned with social and cultural factors, the great expansion of sociology, war, brutality, depression and unemployment, the implications of money, class and ideology, the individual sentiments and sensibilities that grew out of such a history.

Works of Mailer



Norman Mailer

Courtesy: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/norman_mailer/

Advertisement for Myself, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and *The Executioner's Song* are primarily sociological. Mailer's other novels are *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *Why are we in Vietnam?*, *Prisoner of Sex and Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. Mailer's *An American Dream* contains characters who possess constructive and destructive force.

Critical Analysis

Constructive Force

Stephen Richards Rojack, the hero of the novel stands for constructive force. He is a war hero. He is a popular television personality and everyone can identify him. He is highly talented and his success story gives the readers the impression that he is a figure appearing in a dictionary of American heroism. He has contributed much to the society. The creative power in him aids

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Dr. S. Joy Isabella

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him in such endeavours. His marriage to Deborah brings him close to the Kelly family, which is at the hub of conspiracy in society. He is confronted with people who belong to all layers of society. For example, Deborah belongs to the aristocratic background. Her ancestry reveals her ties to various levels of power in business, aristocracy and state. She is the only daughter of Barney Oswald Kelly, a man of indeterminate wealth and power. As Rojack says of her, “ She has been my entry into the big league. I had loved with the fury of my ego... with her beside me I had leverage” (AD.7, 8).

Destructive Force

Rojack had been most unsuccessful in his marriage. He admits the fact that his life with her had been “a series of successes cancelled by quick failures” (AD15). He is ashamed of her infidelity. She is a representative of destructive force to Rojack. He loves her for her worldly power, which has poisoned his inner life. When he is most abject and fearful before her, she taunts him with the pleasures of her infidelities. As he remarks, “Marriage to her was the armature of my ego, remove the armature and I might topple like clay(AD71)”. She is an expression of all the destructive and negative aspects of his present existence. She represents the forces of darkness and he is in conflict with her destructive force. Sarla Palker recognizes the destructive power exuding from some women. It is applicable to Deborah too. She has “ an obsession with the image of a destructive woman, a woman who makes man’s life a living hell for him and who prevents him from realizing his aspirations in life.”(14)

Deborah’s eyes haunt Rojack after her death. She is characterized as a man-eating beast. Her grandfather, Mangaravidi ran a meat-packing plant. The taste for flesh is in her world. As Allan J. Wagenheim remarks:“Deborah is depicted not as a normal adversary, but as a supra-human, a monster and always in animal terms- a great bitch, a lioness, a bull- always a ferocious and predatory animal “(147).

Longing for Freedom

Rojack is instinctively repelled by her touch and longs for freedom from her hooks. He believes that she has the power of a witch and says “She had powers, my Deborah, she was psychic to the worst degree, and she had the power to lay a curse” (AD.22). In the beginning of the novel, Rojack is suffering from the pangs of estrangement from his wife. He is gripped by a

sense of spiritual failure amid the trappings of material success. She has worked at castrating Rojack. To Rojack, Cherry, the beautiful blonde nightclub singer is the origin of creative power. Through Cherry, he finds a meaning in life. Considering Cherry's past life, one can find that anti-life force violently operated against her from childhood itself. She has been the mistress of Kelly. Cherry, who is a mixture of creative force and destructive force, seems to offer the creative force to Rojack. She does not allow herself to be crushed by the destructive force. She maintains a hard-core integrity. Within the brutal world she revolves in, she is effectually able to survive.

Barney Oswald Kelly, a Rich Evil Force

Another member of the destructive force who operates against many characters in the novel, is Barney Oswald Kelly. He is the eighth richest person in the United States, and he had "made a million two hundred times". (AD 1) Considering Kelly's background, he comes from a working class Irish family. Kelly has become wealthy by stealing three thousand dollars from his father and speculating on the stock market. He is a corrupt person who has ruthlessly worked his way from poverty to incalculable wealth and power. As Kaufmann has amply demonstrated "America has made Kelly into a corrupt version of the Renaissance man." (9) Kelly, the ring leader is responsible for vandalism and illicit romance. He is presented as the unavoidable, dark shadow which accompanies the American dream of success. So, he may be considered the destructive force not only for Deborah, but also for Rojack.

Mailer's Theory – A Stifled Self Becoming a Balanced Self

Mailer incorporates his theory in *An American Dream*. His theory is that by airing one's obsessions, by confronting waste and by engaging death, one may help a stifled self to become a balanced self. Through the destruction of the destructive force, Rojack is able to establish his relationship with the creative force of Cherry. He creates a world of violence and then he proceeds to love. Rojack longs for a bright future. He has shed his false self. Philip H. Bufothis justifies Rojack's action saying, "The pivot of the book's action is Rojack's murder of his shrewish, estranged wife, Deborah CaughlinMangaravidi Kelly, who has come to represent for him an oppressive anti-life force." (65)

Annihilating the destructive force, Kelly, he wants to join with the creative life force of Cherry. Unfortunately, Cherry is killed by a Harlem thug. Rojack's creative force tries to join with Cherry's creative force, so that he can be doubly strong to live in the world of treachery. When time fails to add creative force to him, he sets off to search for another source of creative force. In the novel, Cherry's death leads to the growth of Rojack. Her death enables Rojack to set out his journey into the primitive jungles of Yucatan and Guatemala. He has experienced the American dream of power, wealth and status. But they cannot give him the peace of mind. As long as he continues his life in the violent American society, he cannot achieve his dream of peace.

Escape from the Corrupt Society - Regeneration

Rojack arrives in Las Vegas; he has fantastic luck at the gambling tables. He wins enough money to pay off his debts in New York and decides to desert America. He sees a jeweled city and proceeds on his journey. Rojack escapes from the corrupt society of the United States into the sanctuary of an unspoiled state of nature. Rojack achieves the American dream of success. But the price he pays is too large. He has to break the power lines which tie him up. As Laura Adams remarks: "Rojack is an American archetype, who grapples with the devil to emerge victorious with a sense of fresh possibility gained from this most elemental battle" (96).

Rojack's deepest resources of perception emerge after he slays his wife. His intensified perceptions are essential to the first stage of Rojack's regeneration. His strange calm and sense of renewed life make him aware, with a hallucinatory intensity of the life in his body, hair and eyes. He sees molecules living and dying around him. His eyes seem like those of the last German he killed in the war, to go all the way back to God. Murder requires an extraordinary commitment to discover the self, since it violates the most basic mandates and taboos of society and since it involves the murderer in confrontation with death. Certainly, murder forces the individual back to his instincts. His return to instinct is accomplished in several ways. First, he is caught up in mortal combat and needs to rely on his deepest instincts for self-preservation. Second, murder involves acting out one's needs and emotions rather than bottling them up by repression and sublimation. Third, murder necessitates the individual's dependence upon himself and his resources and the rejection of society and its taboos. Finally, as Rojack's plight concerning the disposal of Deborah's corpse makes clear, it pits the individual, alone, against the society which

he has rejected. In this process of death, action, rebellion, and outlawry, the murderer is forced to rely on his instincts and the courage he can muster.

Confrontation between Exterior and Interior Reality

Murder involves the simultaneous confrontation of exterior and interior reality. Rojack begins his voyage without and within when he murders Deborah. He is free of her, of her malice towards him, and of his past. Their marriage is dissolved, and though Rojack believes that Deborah still maintains a magical hold over him, and the hold seems weaken during the course of the novel. He has also won internal liberation. He has had the courage to remove this armature, and is rewarded not by his disintegration but by the rediscovery and repossession of his own violent self. Although Rojack has been weak enough to depend upon something outside of himself for meaning, the measure of his heroism in this novel lies in the fact that he deliberately overthrows this external armature and seeks to find a centre within himself. Mailer seems to assert that murder is Rojack's road to salvation. It is a journey into the deepest part of himself. He feels a catharsis and finds renewal. The annihilation of the destructive power preserves his creative power.

Naming Process: The Style of the Author

Norman Mailer's style is energetic, full of connections and restless. He has developed this style to very good effect in the novel. In the opening of the novel, Mailer makes reference to Kennedy. Rojack's meeting with Kennedy has a significance. It portrays Rojack as a successful hero and he is a representative of creative force. In the fable of Rojack, Mailer presents a picture of an equally successful man's willing descent into the same spiritual maelstrom.

Mailer names his characters in such a way as to reflect their basic qualities. Their names reflect whether they represent creative force or destructive force. Deborah's name is filled with ominous overtones. Deborah sounds like devourer and Caughlin like coffin. Mangaravidi suggests mangle and the Italian for avid to eat. The significance of the domination – submission struggle is evident in the novel. Deborah is identified by the name Deborah Kelly and she is never identified by her married name, until Rojack announces her death. Deborah is a devourer of Rojack's creative force. The villain of the piece, Kelly, sounds like killer. He is the killer of the creative force.

The Locale

Locale plays an important role in the novel. Rojack has to leave New York because it is an epitome of evil, disguised as modern civilization. Then he passes through the sunbaked desert lands like New Mexico and Arizona in order to cleanse his soul. Las Vegas represents a wasteland of marooned souls, greed and lunacy. Yucatan represents an ancient land and it might provide a state of bliss. So, Rojack races through the evil lands and tries to reach Yucatan in Mexico. It is the seat of an ancient civilization. It also represents the mythic reservoir of peace, serenity and transcendent spiritual attainment. Whereas New York and Las Vegas stand for destructive anti-life force, Yucatan and Guatemala represent creative life force. Rojack passes through New York and Las Vegas to reach Yucatan and Guatemala. The destruction of the destructive force leads him to create a new life.

Characterization of the Hero

Mailer could not visualize a hero capable of recreating America within its present boundaries. He must begin anew in a new place. Totally isolated and shattered, he appears unable to purge himself of the emotional vestiges of the past. He is drained of energy at the end of the novel. Unable to get reconciled with the American society, he leaves for the jungles of Yucatan and Guatemala. He renounced the dream of power. His confrontation with the society takes three phases - Deborah, Shago Martin and Kelly. In each of these tests Rojack requires power and violence which liberate his quiescent self.

Early harmony in Rojack's life is destroyed by Deborah and Kelly. He uses violence for destroying them. Mailer uses exquisite language to achieve his purpose. As it is characteristic of the modern novel, it is open-ended. The final journey to Yucatan and Guatemala suggest light and hope for the future. Mailer seems to suggest that the crimes committed by Rojack are insignificant when compared with the atrocities perpetrated by Deborah and Kelly on him. Mailer appears to be of the view that Rojack is more sinned against than sinning.

Mailer's skillful use of language makes it part and parcel of the themes. The themes and the style in which they are dressed, are so inextricably bound that they work together on the reader. Like the shot silk that cannot exist without the strands of the two shades, technique and themes permeate into one another.

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