



Horror and Death as War Effects: A Critical Study of Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead

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Abstract

Norman Mailer, who is one of the prominent novelists in post-war American literature, argues the WWII effects in his novel The Naked and the Dead. He sheds light on the horrible events and death happen in the novel. Moreover, he focuses on the negative aspects of the war and its devastating effects on both the oppressors and the oppressed. This paper aims at expressing the inner thought of the Americans who suffer a lot during and after the war time.

Mailer depicts the individual as either the one who submits to wrongful forces or that who tries to be spiritually independent. He also presents characters as either horrified, powerless, and victimized like Lieutenant Hearn, Trooper Red Valsen, and others or horrifying, powerful, and victimizers like General Cummings and Lieutenant Croft. Mailer also concentrates on the theme of death which happens to some characters as the war effects.

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المخلص

نورمان ميلر، وهو أحد الروائيين البارزين في الأدب الأمريكي في فترة ما بعد الحرب، يناقش آثار الحرب العالمية الثانية في رواية *العاري والميت*. ميلر يسلط الضوء على الأحداث المروعة والموت الذي يحدث في الرواية. علاوة على ذلك، يركز على الجوانب السلبية للحرب وآثارها المدمرة على كل من الظالمين والمضطهدين. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعبير عن الفكر الداخلي للأمريكيين الذين عانوا كثيراً أثناء الحرب وبعدها.

يصور ميلر الفرد إما على أنه الشخص الذي يخضع لقوى غير مشروعة أو الذي يحاول أن يكون مستقلاً روحياً. كما يقدم شخصيات إما مرعوبين وعاجزين وضحايا مثل الملائم هيرن والجندي ريد فالسن وغيرهم أو مرعبين وأقوياء وجناة مثل الجنرال كامينغز والملائم كروفت. يركز ميلر أيضاً على موضوع الموت الذي يحدث لبعض الشخصيات نتيجة للحرب.

Introduction

Norman Mailer (1923-2007) was one of the most famous American novelists after the WWII. Before joining the United States army in 1944, he married Beatrice, his first wife. Mailer went to the Philippines and was stationed with the 112th cavalry. After the surrender of the Japanese, he was sent with the army of occupation to Japan. Mailer expresses his war experiences, describing the army saying that it was: "the worse experience of my life, and also the most important" (Mailer, 2019, 13). When staying in the Philippines and Japan, Mailer wrote hundreds of letters daily to his wife, to serve as the base to his war novel *The Naked and the Dead*, expressing his views on war.

It is worth mentioning that the WWII stimulates the United States American novelists to write war novels. Malcolm Cowley describes war novelists in "The Literary Situation" saying:

War novelists are not sociologists or historians, and neither are they average soldiers. The special training and talent of novelists lead them to express rather special moods. They are usually critical in temper and often they are self-critical to the point of being burdened with feelings of guilt. ... They suffered more than others from the enforced promiscuity of army and shipboard life. Most of them were rebels against discipline when they thought it was illogical ... and rebels against the system that divides officers from enlisted men (quoted in Allen 293).

In *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Norman Mailer deals with the horror of war and its influence on the characters which leads to death that: "being shaped, as they approach death, by forces within themselves" (Bailey 7). In fact, Mailer's dominant subject is the relationship between the war and its negative aspects in daily American's life. War is a threatening tool to destroy man's life that during war: "modern man is in danger of losing his dignity, his freedom, and his sense of self before the enormous power of politics and society" (Miller 68). Mailer refers to man's life in his novel saying that the: "natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety" (Mailer 116). All the subsequent quotations references to the novel are taken from this edition, with the abbreviation (ND) and the page number (s).

The Naked and the Dead is regarded as the novel of war and: "everywhere acclaimed as the best novel of World War II" (Trilling 151). It is understood that in a war novel, the soldier is "the victim of a force he could neither understand nor control" (Ibid). Trilling also mentions that: "the army has become identified with the irrational and destructive authority of society itself" (152). In addition, the novel: "attempts to evaluate the whole complex structure of the American Army in war and peace, as a manifestation of contemporary society, as well as a weapon of conquest and destruction" (171).

In "The Modern Novel" it is mentioned that Mailer's own statement is:

I intended it to be a parable about the movement of man through history. I tried to explore the outrageous propositions of cause and effect, of effort and recompense, in a sick society. The book finds man corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness, but it also finds that there are limits beyond which he cannot be pushed, and it finds that even in his corruption and sickness there are yearnings for a better world (quoted in Allen 296).

However, *The Naked and the Dead* raises into discussion, the ideas of horror and death during WWII time, showing their effects upon people, especially civilian individuals. During war time, people lose faith and all the time they think of what is right and what is wrong within society. In consequences, Mailer:

[E]quates the army with society and thereby explores the fragmented nature of that society, which has militated against social development, revolutionary or otherwise. In so doing, Mailer demonstrates his own loss of faith in the individual's ability to impose himself creatively, perhaps redemptively, on the oppressive condition of the post-war world (Miller 68).

In general, Ihab Hassan indicates that modern man suffers from contemporary life and its effects, mentioning: "spirit is exhausted, civilization is overextended, the individual must move on surfaces or be crushed inward" (12). So, modern man is involved in plight. Mailer refers to the state of the soldiers in war, depicting them in the title of the novel as "Naked" and "Dead". According to McConnell, when a soldier is naked, he is: "to be at once terribly frightened, exalted, and intimate with one's own most intensely conscious self" (67). In addition, the word "Dead" in the title, refers to the state of soldiers as being in crisis when they should not be upset, saying:

To be dead is never to have had such a moment, never to have watched the intricate style of your assurances crumble around you and then be forced to recognize that, amid the rubble of that fallen temple of normality, there is to assist in the construction of new and stronger selfhood (Ibid).

So, man should make a change by his own will to defeat the corrupted society he lives in and to be self-confident. In this respect, McConnell mentions:

In Mailer's world, a man is not only tested and refined by his moments of nakedness, he is also judged by them[...]if the man's past has been one of the tiny evasions, small hypocrisies, then the moment will not endure[...]as it should, in the creation or fabrication of a new style for living, a more embracing and heroic style of being in the world (68).

The Naked and the Dead depicts an invasion of the American army under the control of General Cummings, of Anopopie, the island which is controlled by Japanese forces. When embarking there, a survey, directed by Lieutenant Croft and fourteen other soldiers, gather information of the positions of the enemy. According to Cummings, Anopopie, the fictional island in the novel, is considered as: "a stepping-stone to the apex of political power in the semi-fascistic state he envisions the United States becoming" (Lennon 89). Thus, Anopopie is the centre of horror and death events in the novel.

The novel is divided into four parts. In the first part, "Wave," Mailer presents Lieutenant Croft as a horrifying man who imposes his violence on his platoon and horrifies them. In the second part, "Argil and Mold," Mailer describes his two characters, Lieutenant Hearn and General Cummings and their confrontations. The third part, "Plant and Phantom," deals with the physical confrontation between Lieutenant Hearn and Sergeant Croft. It also depicts Hearn's death. Finally, the fourth part, "Wake," shows the end of the novel and the supposed victory when the Japanese army lacks food and ammunition. However, all the four parts shed light on the war effects such as horror and death (Leigh 4-5).

Horror and Death as War Effects in *The Naked and the Dead*

The Naked and the Dead is a realistic novel which is derived from a historical situation when the island of Anopopie in the South Pacific is captured by an American platoon. Anopopie is held by the Japanese in the WWII during the Philippines campaign. Moreover, the novel presents an actual military experience of men during wartime. The title refers to the men in the war who are spiritually naked and spiritually dead. In war, life is different that it causes fear and death. The needs and desires of the individuals are repressed by the horrifying commanders. This means that men in war are treated like mechanical objects or robots and "all war experiences ... are essentially the same, all war comparable" (Karl 96). Besides, Mailer's aim is to depict war effects that war leads to "death and man's creative urge, fate, [and] man's desire to conquer the elements" (Norman Mailer).

Croft is tyrant and aggressive when treating troopers all the time. When playing cards with troopers, Croft is interrupted by a trooper and feels upset, saying: "If you're really looking for something, you can mess with me" (ND 1). In this situation, the trooper feels horrified and doesn't speak anything. This shows how the troopers are horrified and frightened all the time by the powerful leading men like Croft. Even Croft's smile frightens them as it is a sign of power and victory. That is why, Croft is courageous in the troopers' eyes; and he is described as: "the best platoon sergeant in the Army and the meanest" (ND 11). So, by using his pride, confidence, and violence, Croft horrifies others thinking that the leading man is: "a responsibility he craved; he felt powerful and certain at such moments" (ND 18). As a result, Hennessey feels frightened and horrified; and he is described by Croft as: "Hennessey was frightened and it amused him" (ND 18). Croft keeps: "laughing to release the ferment in him" (ND 11), and believes that he would be killed. Croft's reaction to the idea of Hennessey's death is a real evidence of his horrifying conduct which is imposed on the horrified and powerless trooper Hennessey. Similarly:

His [Croft's] reaction was similar to the one he had felt at the moment he discovered his wife was unfaithful[....] Hennessey's death had opened to Croft vistas of such omnipotence that he was afraid to consider it directly. All day the fact hovered about his head, tantalizing him with odd dreams and portents of power (ND 26).

The narrator comments that Croft's response to Hennessey's death is similar to that when a man discovers the betrayal of his wife. This refers to Croft's unfaithful conduct with the others. Croft is completely satisfied with his omnipotence when he predicts Hennessey's death that: "Hennessey's death had opened to Croft vistas of such omnipotence that he was afraid to consider it directly. All day the fact hovered about his head, tantalizing him with odd dreams and portents of power" (ND 326). So, Hennessey's death enhances Croft's sense of power. In this sense, Croft says: "Hennessey's going to get killed today" (ND 69).

There are a lot of flashbacks presented in the novel. "SAM CROFT THE HUNTER" is a name introduced in a flashback. There are reasons behind presenting such name: "[Croft] is that way because of the corruption-of-the-society[...]. It is because he is a Texan; it is because he has renounced God. He is that kind of man because the only woman he ever loved cheated on him[...] or he was having problems of adjustment" (ND 102). To mention the reasons in little words, Croft is non-believer and non-adapted individual in an immoral society. He also announces that: "I HATE EVERYTHING WHICH IS NOT IN MYSELF" (ND 107). Psychologically, Croft's dominant and horrifying personality prompts him to be ready to confront future challenges. Though Croft is courageous and ambitious to manage war affairs, yet the most important thing for him is lust for horrifying others and killing them without fear of future punishment.

Like Croft, General Cummings has a horrifying and authoritative personality that his soldiers look like: "a nest of ants wrestling and tugging at a handful of breadcrumbs in a field of grass" (ND 27). Cummings's soldiers are described as "ants" according to their state of deterioration, oppression and lack of energy. Besides, the meeting between Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn for the first time, shows a vivid picture of both the horrifying Cummings and the horrified Hearn. When telling Hearn that he has "powerful enemies," Cummings's "voice had been disgustingly apparent" (ND 50) to Hearn who thinks that it is "quite in contrast to the clear cold sense with which he usually estimated men and events" (Ibid). So, amazed by Cummings's unpredictable attitude, Hearn perceives "quite early that he [Cummings] was a tyrant[...] and a frightful snob" (Ibid).

As Hearn is the intellectual equal for Cummings, the former refers to the latter's description in a newspaper article that: "in his manner are combined effectively the force, the tenacity, the staying power of that doughty animal [bulldog] with all the intellect and charm and poise of a college professor or a statesman" (ND 52). This description shows Hearn's complete desire to learn about Cummings's personality and to discover the contradiction between them. Moreover, presenting Cummings as a horrifying commander who always thinks of imposing power and authority on his soldiers, Mailer sheds light on the theme of horror which leads to negative aspects like death. When sending a patrol to the back end of the Japanese position, Cummings's plan is "to determine the validity of a new strategic theory [which] is prompted by raw opportunism" (Miller 68). As a result, this careless conduct causes death to some troops.

Cummings's orders always lead to death due to his ignorance of managing war affairs effectively that he: "wielding power-for-death involves the exploitation and automatization of the classes he governs" (McConnell 74). He speaks with Hearn mentioning: "I've known men who've used filth until it became high art[....] 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" (ND 53). In that manner, McConnell comments that: "Cummings is an evil man; and his evil consists[...] in the deliberation and callousness with which he takes part in the dance of power and death" (73). This conduct is a sort of crime against human beings.

Anyhow, Cummings is fond of using weapons to impose his authority, and horrify others, he addresses Hearn, mentioning: "If you're holding a gun and you shoot a defenseless man, then you're a poor creature, a dastardly person[....] The fact that you're holding the gun and the other man is not is no accident. It's a product of everything you've achieved; it assumes that if[...] you're aware enough, you have the gun when you need it" (ND 54). When speaking with Hearn, Cummings expresses his thoughts on winning the war, saying that the: "root of all the liberals' ineffectiveness comes right sprang out of the desperate suspension in which they have to hold their minds[....] The type of thing that preoccupied me was what makes a nation fight well" (ND 114).

Cummings criticizes Hearn's invalidity of ideas which are regarded wrong for him. Cummings states that: "If you're fighting in defense of your soil, then perhaps you're a little more effective[....] After a couple of years of war, there are only two considerations that make a good army: a superior material force and a poor standard of living" (ND 114). This quotation shows Cummings's view which is opposed to Hearn's ideas of liberalism. In this manner, Leigh states that: "the American model of [an] open society is decadent; the individual freedoms it rests upon are excessive, dysfunctional and harmful to the idea of [the] system" (8-9). In addition, Hearn connects the gap between soldiers and their commander. Hearn is killed with cold blood without even definite plan by his commander.

Being a part of the American army, Cummings gives up his humanity, and behaves in a manner devoid of feelings and senses. Joining the army for both Cummings and Croft, means that they can impose their authority over others in a horrible way. In addition, a horrible incident happens when Hearn throws Cummings's tent floor with a cigarette end. This is considered as an attack for Cummings and "was a symbol of the independence of his troops, their resistance to him. The fear, the respect his soldiers held for him now was a rational one, an admission of his power to punish them, and that was not enough" (ND 212). To resist the whole matter heartlessly, Hearn states that: "The longer you tarried with resistance, the greater it became. It had to be destroyed" (Ibid). For Cummings, the Americans are only people who can live powerfully to control other peoples all over the world.

Generally speaking, horror is always accompanied with power. So, as a horrible reaction, Cummings depreciate Hearn and scorn him by throwing a cigarette end, saying: "If I were to throw this down on the floor, would you pick it up?" (ND 216). This is considered: "a bit steep" by Hearn, then Cummings answers that: "It's tremendously steep, it has to be" (Ibid). Besides, Cummings is always proud of himself as a powerful leading man, declaring: "There was the old myth of divine intervention. You blasphemed, and a lightning bolt struck you. That was a little steep too. If punishment is at all proportionate to the offense, then power becomes water. The only way you generate the proper attitude of awe and obedience is through immense and disproportionate power (Ibid).

Symbollically, the cigarette serves as a tool of control and power for Cummings, and humiliation for Hearn. For Cummings, the cigarette comes to horrify and: "threaten the army as a preview of the future, the bureaucratic pattern of the totalitarian dream" (ND 273). Thus, Hearn is the central figure of humiliation by both Cummings and Croft. After experiencing horror on the hand of Cummings, Hearn is sent to Croft's platoon to be doomed to death as the latter is fond of control and jealousy. Hearn is killed before Croft by the Japanese; and this is a kind of revenge for Croft. In fact, Hearn desires to make "the world in his own image and impose his will upon it" (Hassan 147). Anyhow, he becomes the victim to the most horrifying intrigues presented by the victimizer, Croft. According to McConnell, Hearn "is an ideal figure to become the unifying consciousness, the central moral voice of *The Naked and the Dead*" (75). So, Hearn is Mailer's tragic hero who keeps watching the events around to show and "understand a complex situation, all the while keying themselves to the point of urgency, the critical point of understanding where the action is unremittingly forced upon them" (Ibid).

The contemporary society always cares for those horrifying and immoral individuals as Cummings and Croft, and ignores the moral ones as Hearn. Mailer presents Hearn as a modern hero who is surrounded by a lot of difficulties which cannot be overcome easily. This depicts the picture of a modern man in a modern society during and after the WWII. Critics think that in this novel

there is a comparison between the oppressed and the oppressors and a struggle between the human and nonhuman, saying:

In [the] modern novel, [the] man seems to overcome the contradictions of his experience, its destructive or demonic element, by assuming the role of [the] antihero, the rebel-victim. The rebel denies without saying No to life; the victim succumbs without saying Yes to oppression. Both acts are, in a sense, identical: they affirm the human against the nonhuman (Hassan 31).

The character of Hearn is to some extent helpless, confused, and corrupted when being between the hammer and the anvil of the hostile forces. This refers to Hearn's situation that he is between the soldiers and their powerful leading men; and also between Cummings and Croft. Hearn, who is depicted as horrified and hesitant, is described by Mailer as: "This surprising deficiency in Hearn is surely intentional, as Mailer introduces an intelligent and sometimes outspoken man only to emphasize how ineffective he is. Resented both by the commanders and by the soldiers, he is eventually killed for no purpose; such is the fate of liberalism in Mailer's universe" (Miller 69). Moreover, on the one hand, Cummings, Croft, and Hearn fight each other in their own war, and on the other hand, fight against Japanese.

The situation of the Japanese prisoner, shows Croft's arrogance and horrifying personality. Croft's behaviour is cold-blooded that he gives the prisoner hope in life while plans to kill him. When killing the soldier, Croft describes the war as: "a nice measure of satisfaction of an unquenchable lust for conquest and blood" (Trilling 152). This shows Croft's commanding attitude towards others' death that: "The smile on the dead man's face amused him, and a trivial rill of laughter emitted from his lips" (ND 129). For Croft, death is just a kind of justice that:

Croft always saw order in death. Whenever a man in the platoon or company had been killed he would feel a grim and quiet satisfaction as though the death was inevitably just[....] Croft did not believe that the longer he was in combat the poorer his chances became. Croft believed a man was destined to be killed or not killed, and automatically he had always considered himself exempt (ND 294).

Croft feels that he is superior to those inferior soldiers who are killed in the war. He thinks that his platoon's death is due to their weakness. When climbing Mount Anaka in the island, the soldiers find a disabled bird which attracts them to treat it so gently. This situation expresses that the soldiers lack warmth and pleasure as they are away from their families. They also try to compensate themselves by looking to the innocent bird. Besides, when looking to that bird, Roth, one of the soldiers, expresses feelings of love and comfort that:

Roth was completely absorbed in the bird[....] Roth had fallen in love with the bird immediately. It was lovely[....] He felt exactly the same joy he knew when his child had plucked at the hairs on his chest[....] He could not have picked a worse time to antagonize Croft. And deep within him, his rage was alive again, flaring. Everything was wrong, and Roth played with a bird, while nearly half the platoon stood about watching (ND 351).

To impose his horrifying personality, Croft orders Roth to catch the bird. Croft is interested as he would feel: "the bird's heart beating like a pulse against his palm. Its tiny eyes darted about frantically, and Croft's anger worked into his fingertips. It would be the simplest thing to crush it in his hand" (Ibid). Anyway, Croft kills the bird and his action causes shock and horror to the soldiers.

Despite all the difficulties, Croft insists on climbing Mount Anaka. He wants to put everything under control. In this situation, Wilson is shot in the stomach by the Japanese. In return, other soldiers try to save him but he dies. So, Wilson's death represents the spiritual death of the individuals within the American society. When trying to climb Mount Anaka, Roth also dies when missing a jump and fails to get the others' help. Roth's death is painful to Red Valsen. That's why, Valsen tries to be away from him. Roth feels that he is unable to be a good soldier. So, his self-pity and weakness lead to his death. Moreover, the death of these men is because of the insistence of their commanders to achieve their personal victory. Yet, Croft's failure makes him understand "himself and much more. Of life. Everything" (ND 1393).

Hoplessness controls the minds of the men. The enlisted Red Valsen notices a lot of the rotten Japanese bodies with their unbearable stench. When looking at a dead body, Valsen proclaims:

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 (ND 524).

Valsen always clashes with the authoritative Croft. He feels that "everything is crapped up, everything is phony, everything curdles when you touch it" (ND 526). Valsen is like Hearn, both have the same feelings about life. Valsen is controlled by "a particular blend of pessimism and fatalism," and Hearn states that: "if you searched something long enough, it always turned to dirt" (Ibid).

When describing the soldiers' lives in the United States, Mailer tries to criticize the American society. The poverty at that time makes Valsen who is 23 years old, feel very old. According to Mailer, there is a similarity between the American society and the army, that America is described 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" (Miller 91). This expresses the fragmented nature of the American society which cannot be socially developed. In "The White Negro", Mailer presents his attitude that:

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? (94).

In modern age, man would lose his identity, freedom, and dignity due to the society's fragmentation caused by war. Yet, Mailer describes *The Naked and the Dead* as: "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 (quoted in Siegel 295). Mailer tries to say that despite man's death, hope exists for the individual as maintaining self-autonomy by defiance. Indeed, the individual doesn't achieve victory, yet this prompts him to protect his individuality.

Conclusion

The WWII is a background of exploring different problems happened in the American society. At wartime, the lives of people in general are transformed completely up to down. People lose their individual will and identity. War, which causes horror and death to some American individuals, is the predominant impression in *The Naked and the Dead*. The reader can trace the negative aspects like horror and death that happen to the lives of people during and after the WWII time. The novel deals with individual existential confrontations in the invading army. However, the American individuals are in war against each other, as well as against Japanese.

Horror and victimization recur everywhere in the novel. On the island, Cummings and Croft are the victimizers who impose horror and power upon others. The process of victimization to the men in the war causes death to some of them. Cummings's order of sending Hearn to a useless mission at the island back causes the latter's death. Besides, Cummings controls the lives of people in the novel. He is an evil man who works in the field of power and death against humanity.

During war, it is expected that death takes place at any moment. In general, men have a pessimistic view that they fear death, and this view bothers men's mental health. Moreover, the commanders employ the chaos of war to their own benefits, just to feel that they are powerful and everything is happening under their control. The war which is a historical and political fact, is seen as a hasty image for Mailer's underlying critical conflict. Finally, It is clear that Mailer's characters like, Cummings and Croft, cannot get power and achieve victory without horrifying those who are under their control. Besides, on the one hand, the victimized should obey their commanders' random orders and this leads to their destruction due to loss of self-confidence. On the other hand, the victimizers who fail to achieve their goals to some extent, can understand life properly.

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