

Advertisements for Myself: Norman Mailer's Critique of American Society

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1. INTRODUCTION

Norman Mailer is one of the major writers of America, who has written in different genres: fiction, non-fiction, and even an autobiography, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959). It was different from a conventional autobiography, because apart from his life, Mailer expressed his views on society, government, the effects of the economic Depression, and the impact of the Second World War on America.

He used this book as an outlet for his reactions to what was happening around him. He expressed his elation when his war novel, *The Naked and The Dead* (1948) became a best seller and he was welcomed into the world of writers and acknowledged as a serious and talented writer.

Mailer shared his disappointment with his readers when his second book, *Barbary Shore* (1951), which dealt with the cold war, was not successful. He also shared with his readers the luke-warm response of critics to his Hollywood novel, *The Deer Park* (1995), which dealt with life in Hollywood during the McCarthy years of Government repression.

After going through numerous ups and downs in his creative and personal life, Mailer's personality underwent a gradual change and now the reserved and meticulous writer adopted a rebellious and bohemian life-style. His interest in the theme of violence took him to the bull-fights, while he was in Mexico, and later to the boxing bouts. He learnt boxing from his boxer-friend, Jose Torres' (Mills, 381), and he frequently practiced at the Golden Gloves Club. Mailer's activities at this stage of his career are indicative of the influence of the Hemingwayesque philosophy of the necessity for courage and the need to be masculine. Mailer believed that,

it was more important to be a man than a very good writer, that probably I could not become a very good writer unless I learned how to keep my nerve and what is more difficult, learned how to find more of it (Advertisements 225).

Around this time, Mailer gave his views in a newly-started writer's paper, *The Village Voice*. In his column he wrote about "The declaration of my private war on American journalism, mass communication and totalitarianism" (*Advertisements 236*).

After a long gap, during which he wrote his famous essay, "*The White Negro*" (1957), which took as its theme the issues of resistance against totalitarianism, the philosophy of the Hip and existential living. After a gap of two years, he wrote

Advertisements for Myself (1959), which is confessional in tone and tells mostly of the post-war literary style. This book also contains the essay, "The white Negro". This essay is very significant, because the issue of existential living, the significance of violence, sex and resistance against totalitarian forces -which frequently recur in his corresponding works - all find their origin in this essay.

Mailer observed that after the Second World War, there was a change in the attitude of people, especially the younger generation towards life. The young men appeared to be deeply insecure. Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of the horrors of the Second World War, concentration camps, gas chambers and the threat of atomic annihilation which created this feeling. In the face of insecurity and lack of freedom in a war-ridden environment, personal dignity also appeared to have been eroded.

Such adverse circumstances pushed the younger generation of Americans towards an existential approach to life, which emphasized living for the present and immediate gratification of the senses.

Mailer had closely observed this phenomenon in a changing America which was becoming more state controlled and totalitarian in nature. He has spoken out strongly in this essay, as well as in other works, his distrust for totalitarian society which has a dehumanizing effect on the individual. Life in such an oppressive atmosphere is referred to by Mailer, as "the years of conformity and depression" (*Advertisements 271*). Mailer also observes that "a stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve" (*Advertisements 271*). This fear psychosis has affected individuals to the extent that their emotions and actions are no longer natural and spontaneous, but have become stilted and inauthentic.

Mailer is also concerned with the adverse effect that the repression of society would have on a creative person. His creativity and romanticism would dry up and its place would be taken by conformity and fear. As Mailer admits to Richard Stern in an interview, "the sickness of our times for me has been just this damn thing that everything has been getting smaller and smaller and less and less important, that the romantic spirit has dried up" (*Advertisements 305*).

Mailer sees individual heroism, stamina and courage as the way to break through the dehumanizing system of society, which, if

not opposed, would lead man to become nothing more than a tiny cog in the gigantic machinery of social structure.

Extreme insecurity and fear of the future have made the young American live totally for the present. This individual is the American existentialist whom Mailer calls the "hipster". He has realized that if he does not defy the restrictive social norms, he will either die an instant death from an atomic explosion or face the certainty of a slow death by conformity to a repressive society.

Mailer is of the opinion that the source of the Hip is the Negro, who has lived a truly existential life in the face of danger, insecurity and strife on a daily basis.

After the Second World War, the Negro, along with his jazz came in contact with the bohemian juvenile delinquent, which caused the birth of the hipster; and the white youth adopted the Negro way of existential life.

This essay is a mile-stone in Mailer's career and here he has been able to explain very lucidly a phase that the American youth was passing through, a phenomenon which none of his contemporaries had been able to fully comprehend and put into words. Mailer's essay proved prophetic, and theory and fact were woven so effectively in this essay that it became a fore-runner of a new counter-culture.

It was a turbulent period for America. America had entered into the Vietnam war which Mailer vehemently opposed, as he considered it unheroic Mailer participated in a march on the Pentagon in Washington in protest of this war.

This event was portrayed by Mailer in his book, *The Armies of the Night* (1968) very effectively. The subjective treatment that Mailer had given to this historic Pentagon march had a dramatic personal touch which no historian could have portrayed. His work was recognized by critics, and he won the Pulitzer prize for this book.

Mailer was deeply concerned with the fact that this inglorious war revealed that there was something drastically wrong with the American society which produced frustrated men, who saw

in the Vietnam War an opportunity to unleash their sadistic impulses Mailer was also concerned with the moral position of America in its involvement in Vietnam. He had been articulate in his views on the political and social environment of America, and in its wake, Mailer's opposition of the Vietnam war in *The Armies of the Night* was not surprising. What, however, surprised and created a furore in the literary circles was the unusual and appealing approach of Mailer's delineation of the famous march on the Pentagon.

Mailer's writings cover a wide canvas: war, political conventions, boxing, bull-fighting, man's landing on the moon, and women's liberation, apart from his views on other writers, Government politics, death, cancer and murder. The wide variety of subjects taken by Mailer have been prompted mostly by the fact of his awareness, sensitivity and reaction to these happenings of his age.

He lived through the Second World War during the forties, the repressive McCarthy era of the fifties and the sixties, the women's liberation movement of the seventies, the conservative life-style of the eighties and the nineties and then the Clinton era.

The post-modern era of America was confusing due to events rapidly occurring one after the other, which appeared obscure and open-ended. However, in *Advertisements for Myself*, Norman Mailer has tried to record these historical events in comprehensible narrations in the earlier traditions of American writing through his fictional and non-fictional writings.

REFERENCES

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- [4] Stern, Richard. "Hip, Hell and the Navigator", *Advertisements for Myself*.

