

## Elements Of Power And Politics In Norman Mailer's The Naked And The Dead

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### Abstract

*This paper presents the elements of power and politics through analyzing Norman Mailer's novel The Naked and the Dead. It is not just a war novel, and it is also a profound political and psychological examination of power, control, and the human condition under extreme pressure. This novel is setting during the World War II on a fictional Pacific Island. It is discussing the physical battles to reveal the complex and often brutal dynamics of military hierarchy and political ideology. At the heart of the novel is the rigid military chain of command, which Mailer uses to explore the ways power is distributed and abused. The American army is depicted as a miniature society where rank determines value, and individual identity is often stripped away. The Naked and the Dead is an attempt to present an element of power and politics from a variety of perspectives.*

**Key words:** *An Exploration of Hierarchy, Human Struggle in War, Class and Social Commentary, Politics of War, Existentialism.*

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### INTRODUCTION:

Norman Kingley Mailer is an American writer, journalist and filmmaker. He is a prominent cultural commentary and critic, expressing his controversial views through his novels. Norman Mailer's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* is widely regarded as one of the finest American novels of the twentieth century. It follows an American platoon fighting to capture a Japanese - held island called Anopopei during World War II. The novel opens as the platoon lands on the beach and faces its first combat, where one soldier is quickly killed. As the men push into the island, they struggle with the harsh jungle conditions and their own fears and conflicts. The story alternates between the platoon's grueling mission and flashbacks exploring the soldiers' backgrounds. The main characters include the ruthless Sergeant Croft, the idealistic Lieutenant Hearn, and General Cummings, who sees the war as a way to gain power. Tensions rise between Croft and Hearn as they lead the men on a dangerous reconnaissance patrol into enemy territory. During the patrol, Hearn is killed, and Croft takes command, pushing the exhausted men to climb a treacherous mountain despite their protests. During the ordeal, several soldiers are injured, and some soldiers dead. Meanwhile, on the other side of the island, Major Dallesen launches a surprise attack that turns out to be unexpectedly successful, effectively winning the campaign. In the end, the surviving members of the platoon learn that their arduous mission was ultimately pointless, as the Japanese forces had already been severely weakened. The novel closes with the American officers reflecting on the arbitrary nature of war and their own roles in it, while preparing to move on to the next battle. Under the immediate influence of American fiction from the 1930s, *The Naked and the Dead* illustrates Mailer's desire to adapt the social and political concerns of Dos Passos, Farrell, and Steinbeck to World War Two and postwar conditions; "Before I was seventeen, I had formed the desire to be a major writer.... I read and reread Studs Lonigan, *U.S.A.*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Later, I would add Wolfe, Hemingway, Faulkner, and, to a small extent, Fitzgerald; but Farrell, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck were the novelists for me" (13). Dos Passos' *U.S.A. trilogy* provides a technical model for an enormous collective novel, a tapestry - like social canvas capable of including the whole diversity of America's pluralistic culture. Dos Passos demonstrates how society can be treated as a vast social machine, its parts dismantled piece by piece in literary analysis. Mailer declared political preferences, and the novel's literary models have a common denominator in determinism. The method of composition used in *The Naked and the Dead*.

*The Naked and the Dead* places these issues of the late 1940s in the United States into a fictional context only slightly disguised by the Pacific location, generic features, and historical details. The novel's predominant political theme is a reaction to the resurgence of conservative and rightist power as viewed by an increasingly beleaguered, defensive, and institutionally feeble leftist culture. The formation of the Progressive Party was largely the result of the fear in left-wing groups that a fascist takeover in the American government was potentially imminent. Wallace observed a growing restriction of civil liberties in the USA and an increasing drift towards a disastrous and domestic fascism. Correspondingly, American foreign policy, particularly towards the Soviet Union, had become dangerously reactionary: Our government is violating our most fundamental principles in almost every section of the globe. Central to Wallace's political vision, which critics both then and now characterize as near paranoid, was an antagonism to what was perceived as the inordinate power of the military-industrial complex and anti-democratic elites in institutions. Wall Street and the Military have taken over, announced Wallace's running mate in the 1948 presidential election. The Wallace campaign was organized around an attack on those who, while sharing in the privileges of our imperfectly democratic society, seek to undermine its fabric. Wallace's fourteen-point program included a specific measure to end the dominance of the military in American foreign policy, thus invoking the wise policy of Clemenceau, who said war is too important to be left up to the generals.

In *The Naked and the Dead*, the protagonist Lieutenant Robert Hearn plays a crucial role in challenging the dominant ideology of power and politics that governs the military system. His beliefs, actions and inner conflicts are central to Mailer's critique of authoritarianism, hierarchy, and the dehumanizing machinery of war. Hearn is an educated, liberal-minded officer, unlike most others in common. He is deeply aware of the moral compromises the military demands, but initially tries to coexist within the system. The army in the novel functions like a miniature authoritarian state. Power is centralized, unquestioned, and enforced through ranks, discipline, and fear. Mailer explores political power in action, especially how: authority is imposed, orders are followed blindly, dissent is punished. Cummings represents a fascist world view he believes the purpose of war is to create order through domination. His ideology reflects a political system built on hierarchy and oppression, such as fascism and militarism. Hearn is the moral and political counterpoint to Cummings. He resists authoritarian power and believes in equality, fairness and rationality. His eventual defiance and death symbolize the struggles of democratic values against oppression power. The novel explores class inequality, as most soldiers are poor or working-class men treated as expendable. It critiques how political systems devalue individual lives during war. Through their thoughts and "Time machine" flashbacks, we see how politics shapes their pre-war struggles, racism, poverty. In a press meeting after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer underlined the compelling necessity for political commitment: "At this particular period, I don't think a writer can avoid being political to a great degree. There has been a regrettable tendency in the last decade in America for writers to be unpolitical, and I think this is partially accountable for the poverty of American letters in this period" (26).

Wallace provided a vehicle for Mailer's urge to politics as a writer. It is not the case that Wallace's anti-Cold War stance dovetailed with Mailer's desire for rapprochement with communism, as was the case with most of Wallace's literary supporters. *The Naked and the Dead* demonstrates that Mailer took the Wallacite prediction that America was in danger of becoming fascist as a serious proposition at least two years before the 1948 campaign. The novel is a lengthy exploration of the right-wing tendency in the military, both at the higher and lower levels. In taking a more positive view of power, the novel philosophically departs from its socialist-inspired realism and ideologically informed naturalism, moving toward a purer, more extreme species of naturalism. Harold Kaplan points out, "merely physical energy in *The Naked and the Dead* is represented not only by the environment but also by the behavioristic theories of physical energy that underpin Cummings' reactionary views and prophecies" (12). The extreme naturalistic pro-power interpretation of Hearn's death (hinted at in the novel) implies that the Lieutenant is actually destroyed by physical energy. Richard Poirier observes, "the conglomerates that fill space and determine the apportionments of time rather than the General's influence qua officer or his personal actions" (14). On this view, Cummings and Croft are only associated with Hearn's death, not contributing factors. The death has nothing to do with ideology. A distinction needs to be made between the logic of the thesis and that of the subjugated knowledge, between Cummings and Croft as structural vectors of military power in which they are certainly fascistic and

Cummings and Croft as vital forces separate from the mechanics of either Mailer's literary structuring or those of the military hierarchy (in which they are not necessarily fascistic). Judged as social forms, they illustrate Mailer's concept seen as the only source of vitalist power in a naturalistic world, they have a not unheroic dimension.

Cummings is to use Richard Poirier's phrase, "a performing self." His ideas are intended to have personal repercussions and consequences in the world. Conversely, when thought does not take the form of policy or action, Cummings suffers the agonies of a withdrawal of personal power. Since the soldiers functioned like an extension of his own body, the failure of the military campaign becomes a physical malady: "The power, the intensity of the urges within himself, inexpressible, balked, seemed to course through his limbs, beating in senseless fury against the confines of his body. There was everything he wanted to control, and he could not direct even six thousand men; no man had been able to balk him" (258).

The subjugated knowledge in *The Naked and the Dead* does not add up too much more than a veiled respect for a voluntaristic conception of power, for individuals qua individuals, and for personal activism within a reality that defies or rejects epistemologies that are not subversive of social appearances. The asserted elements - the bias of structure, the immediate historical paranoia, the left - liberal antipathy to power - are radical in quite another sense. As a result of the competing claims of these two distinct and disproportionate influences, the dilemma of power in *The Naked and the Dead* cannot be resolved. Inevitably, as Robert Solotaroff observes, "Mailer loses control of the novel's symbolic lines, which become entangled" (18).

The novel finally reveals a dependence on the model of the thirties' writer of social fiction. In Richard Poirier's analysis, "Mailer's being a literary young man forced him to lie, even while he mined his truths without knowing it. The truth was simply that perversity and power interested him far more than those efforts at health that led to limpness and defeat. The novel thus remains awkwardly poised between two styles of radical thought. What is most surprising is that in his next novel, Mailer chooses to set about recovering not the perversity and power of *The Naked and the Dead*'s subjugated knowledge, which takes place in his mature fiction, but his left - liberal radicalism, pursuing a richer and more rigorous understanding of Marxist culture.

## CONCLUSION

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* uses war as a backdrop to explore how political power controls, corrupts, and crushes human dignity, mailers the novel a profound meditation an authority, resistance, and the politics of obedience. Mailer uses war as a microcosm to examine broader political and philosophical questions about power - who has it, how they use it, and the personal and societal costs of its pursuit. The story of the novel is deeply connected with power and politics not only in its plot, but in its characters, structure, and underlying themes. Mailer's observing eye is focused on human struggle. He sees one of the primary duties of the novelist to serve as the honest reporter of man's efforts to strengthen him as he struggles against alien forces and the realities of war.

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