

## THE JOURNEY TO REDEMPTION: A STUDY OF THE VIOLENCE IN NORMAN MAILER'S *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD*

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### Abstract

*The Naked and the Dead*, as Norman Mailer's first and representative work, is not only the most classical war fiction, but also the most controversial work since World War II. The war is used as a background to explore various problems emerging in American society. Throughout history, violence has always played an important part in human development, and promoted the development of human society. War as the extreme manifestation of violence causes great significance on human history. During the time of World War Two, people lives under the shadow of totalitarianism, the situation is especially serious in the U.S. Army. Some of the soldiers are transformed to war machines with neither personal will nor identity. In Mailer's mind, violence and creativity have a twin-like relation, if we cut all the violence out of society, we also cut out all the creativity, and violence becomes the resolution which people employ with to regain their humanity, so as to have self-redemption. Croft's failure of conquering Mount Anaka fully reveals there is still possibility that human can be redeemed.

**Keywords:** *The Naked and the Dead*; violence; redemption; totalitarianism

### Introduction

#### Norman Mailer's Major Life and *The Naked and the Dead*

Norman Mailer (1923-2007) was born in a Jewish family and raised in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating from Harvard University, he was drafted to the U.S. Army. Nevertheless, he was not involved in many battles in World War II, his military experience provided him a lot of materials in producing his first book—*The Naked and the Dead*, which is also considered as the best war fiction since World War II.

### Literature Review

*The Naked and the Dead*, as one of the greatest war novels about World War II, receives many interpretations from different approaches. Norman Mailer's study abroad started from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century since the publication of his first book—*The Naked and the Dead*. It attracts various interpretations. But after researching, the thesis notices that some critics are so occupied by illustrating the power, totalitarianism and racism from different literature theories, such as existentialism and feminism. Additionally, some critics attempt to find out the practical significance of politics and society from the novel.

Though some scholars notice the violence in the novel, most of them only take it superficially as connection to power or war. For example, in Benjamin E. Onofrio's M.A. thesis "American Totalitarianism in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Armies of The Night*", he argues that Mailer's characters are unable to possess power without oppressing those who are under them by violence. From his opinion, violence is employed by the superiors to consolidate their power which can help them better oppress their subordinates. However, in "Control and Freedom in *The Naked and the Dead*" written by Raymond J. Wilson III, he argues that "the individual can get regeneration through violence" by analyzing the sexual violence and violent crimes in the novel (165).

Besides these critics, there are also many interviews with Mailer. Carl E. Rollyson adds information from his own interviews and researches in *The lives of Norman Mailer: A Biography*, which links Mailer's art with real events in Mailer's life and provides readers with a provocative critiques of Mailer's major novels. Lawrence Grobel's "Norman Mailer: Stupidity Brings out Violence in Me" also indicates Mailer's violence philosophy, as Mailer says in the interview: "violence and creativity have a twin-like relation...if you cut all the violence out of the society, you also cut all the creativity" (439). These interviews help people to understand Mailer's erratic behaviors and fascination with violence.

As one of the best war novels about World War II, *The Naked and Dead* is open to various interpretations. After a close reading of the novel and literature review on Mailer studies home and broad, the author of this thesis finds that *The naked and the Dead* is much more than a war novel. Some scholars notice the violence in the text, but without giving more analysis. While some of them only analyze the violence with connection to Mailer's violence fascination. Various kinds of violence are fully exposed in the novel. It is fully acknowledged that World War II is a war fighting for justice. America as one of the countries in The Allies, the soldiers involving the war should be considered as heroes. But why does Mailer depict some of them so violently? What is the significance of violence in the novel? Based on the former achievements, the thesis focuses on the study of the violence of Croft in *The Naked and the Dead* and the thesis's argument is that violence may lead individuals to the journey of redemption.

## **Research Method**

Documentary research is one of the research methodologies in this paper. This paper is concluded after a massive documentary research by utilizing internet as well as library to collect books, interviews and journals relevant to Norman Mailer and his Novel *The Naked and the Dead*. Moreover, textual analysis is vital in the research. With focus on the characters—Croft and the two other soldiers' changes, the details textual analysis of the novel will be done to examine the embodiment of the struggle and the response of them. The specific work analysis will finally provide and expected findings for this thesis.

## **Discussion**

### **The Necessity of Violence**

Throughout history, violence has always played an important part in human development, and promoted the development of human society. From the ancient times up to now, there are various forms of violence at every period of human history, such as revolutionary, war, working-class movement. In contemporary society, there are many kinds of working-class movements, whose main form is going on strike, such as Chartist movement, Textile Workers' Uprising Lyon and the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in China, etc. The whole twentieth century witnesses a Russian revolution, two World Wars, a Cold War and many wars in the Middle East. Though, not all violence can facilitate the development of human society, without violence, in Mailer's mind, society cannot be complete, as he states: "violence and creativity have a twin-like relation, if you cut all the violence out of society, you also cut out all the creativity" (Grobel, 439). Besides, Mailer also further suggests:

Individual violence is the affirmation of barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to be proffered to the collective violence of state; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth. (*The White Negro*, 14)

In *The White Negro*, Mailer makes a distinction between the individual violence and the collective violence by the state, and he believes the individual violence may lead to freedom. From above, we can see Mailer has a positive attitude towards individual violence under certain circumstance. However, the World Health Organization defines violence as "intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, or deprivation".

### **The Reasons for Croft's Violence**

#### ***Violence Tradition in American Culture***

America prides itself on a sound legal system, yet it is also a country full of violence. This violence tradition can be traced back to the era of colony. Even now, we can see American campus shooting going rampant. But it does not mean the collapse of the America system. In other words, violence is a normal phenomenon in America, just as John Herbs says, "the violence that happened in American society in the 1960s is not a deformity in American history, nor a sign that the United States institutions are going to collapse. It is a common behavior of the United States when there is a huge difference in its goal or when a certain group tries to eliminate great injustice" (*Violence in America* xiii). Moreover, violence does not only exist in America, it is an integral part of human history. What makes America different from other countries is that violence is not only the tradition of America society but also a part of American national character, just as Richard Maxwell Brown says, "violence has accompanied virtually every stage and aspect of our national experience...it is part of our unacknowledged value structure" (118). However, why does violence become a tradition in American society? There are various reasons.

Back in the frontier days, there were many wars between the white colonists and the native Indians. Those so-called pioneers slaughter a large number of Indians and occupies their land. No wonder Richard M. Brown once says: "there may be no other reason except the war against Indians had a more violent impact on the formation of American character" (48). Sam Croft is born and raised in the state of Texas, former Mexican territory annexed by the United States during the Westward Movement. On the one hand, in the earlier frontier days, the legal system in remote areas of Texas is not sound enough, so that many conflicts between people are usually resolved through violence. On the other hand, in the south of America, the tradition of linking violence to honor is more obvious than the north in American culture. Most of the southerners in America attach great importance to the violation of personal honor. In Zhang Lixin's "The Violence Tradition in American Culture and Literature", he argues, "in the culture of south America, the tradition of associating violence with honor is more prominent" (49). Moreover, such way of regaining honor through violence is also frequently implied in many southern writers' works. For example, in William Faulkner's novels, especially in the *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, "A Rose for Emily", *Go Down, Moses*, *Intruder in the Dust*, etc., regaining honor through violence is often applied. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Henry Sutpen is killed in front of his home by his brother Charles Bon in the name of defending the dignity of his family, and old Sutpan is also killed by his lover's grandfather. In "A Rose for Emily", the protagonist Emily, for fear of being rejected, murders the man she loves, and sleeps with the corpse for many years. She regains her honor and dignity through such horrible violence. Besides Faulkner, the theme of violence consistently exists in the O'Conner, Stephen Crane as well as Jack London. So that if the southerners are insulted and dishonored, the best and straight way to regain honor is to defeat their opponents through violence. That is also how Croft is educated.

When he was about twelve, there was a fool kid down at Harper who used to give Sam a Licking (Scratching the back of his gray scraggly hair, his hat in his hand.). That kid would lick Sam every day, and Sam would go back and pick a fight the next day. Ah'll tell ya, he ended up by whopping the piss out of that kid. (ND, 321)

Violence has become the straightest and efficient way to regain honor for him. Once people benefit from violence, they will prefer to use violence to solve everything, and gradually, they will become more violent.

### **The Journey to Redemption Through Violence**

Redemption is defined as 'the act of redeeming or atoning for a fault or mistake, or the state of being redeemed'. In the novel, the soldiers are gradually transformed to war machines. Therefore, they no longer possess personal thinking or identity as human beings. For some superiors, they even attempt to rival God. Croft is longing for being omnipotent and keeping everything under his control. Cummings, as a totalitarian, tells Hearn: "man is in transit between brute and God...man's deepest urge is omnipotence...to achieve God" (ND, 647). Therefore, Cummings' enthusiasm for power is totally insane, which drives him to rival God. Croft is just like Cummings in the novel, and the only difference between them is Croft using gunpoint intimidation

instead of possessing such systematical theory to convince the others. In religion, redemption is defined as: “the saving of the soul from sin and its consequences. It may also be called deliverance or salvation from sin and its effects... and redemption can only be achieved either by the independent choice of free will and personal effort or the grace of deity”. According to the Bible, the original sin is “the Christian doctrine of humanity’s state of sin resulting from the fall of man, stemming from Adam and Eve’s rebellion in Eden”. Various evil behaviors of humanity are fully revealed in the Bible, and “the most hidden and undiscovered sin is human’s desire to be God” (qtd. in Jiating 37).

Mary Flannery O’Conner even argues that certain people can have redemption only through violence: “some people can be redeemed only through violence, as violence can bring them to reality, and make them get prepared for the grace of deity, since those people are too stubborn and obstreperous, and they can never be sober unless through violence” (35). Therefore, Croft must go through violence to get redemption.

### ***Failure of Conquering Mount Anaka***

Croft, as a totalitarian, lusts for power, and hopes to keep everything under control, just as he says, “I hate everything which is not in myself” (ND 331). However, Croft changes at the end of the novel: he no longer pursues for power. Since in the last part of the novel, Croft fails to climb Mount *Anaka*.

The first time when Croft sees Mount *Anaka*, the platoon is still in the landing craft for the beach. Croft is quite moved and impressed by the seemingly “wise and powerful mountain” (ND 881). He never sees it so clearly before.

He stared at it now, examined its ridges, feeling an instinctive desire to climb the mountain and stand on its peak, to know that all its mighty weight was beneath his feet; he knew awe and hunger and the peculiar unique ecstasy he had felt after Hennessey was dead, or when he had killed the Japanese prisoner. (ND, 882)

When Croft is staring at the powerful Mount *Anaka*, he is possessed by the same ecstasy when he kills a Japanese prisoner. The similar ecstasy also occurs when he kills a man in the National Guard. But why does he have the similar ecstasy? The thesis believes that the feeling of control and omnipotence satisfies him, just as Mailer depicts in the novel, “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). Hennessey’s death confirms Croft’s intuition or an exultant sense of power. At an earlier time before Hennessey is killed, Croft believes, “Hennessey’s going to get killed today” (ND, 69). Hennessey’s death gives him an illusion that he can be omnipotent. Because of his prediction, he urges to conquer Mount *Anaka* so as to enjoy the ecstasy of being omnipotent.

The second time when he sees Mount *Anaka*, the platoon is on the island. The idea of climbing the mountain lingers over in his mind, “he could have given the reason, but

the mountain tormented him, beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere" (ND, 979). While he realizes angrily and frustratedly as Lieutenant Hearn will lead the platoon to go through the pass, and he will never have a chance to climb the mountain. Because of the military hierarchy, Hearn outranks everyone in the platoon and he becomes an obstacle that Croft must overcome.

The third time when Croft confronts Mount Anaka is after the platoon's falling into Japanese ambush. Unfortunately, Wilson gets shot, the platoon has to spare some men to escort Wilson back to the beach. However, there are so few of the experienced soldiers left in the platoon, Croft is "depressed for once, almost a little frightened" (ND, 1036). Since Wilson is injured, Croft wonders if he would be the next to be shot. Croft cannot forget the night, when the Japanese crosses the river, and he shudders in his foxhole. It is a shame that he cannot control himself. As he says, "I HATE EVERYTHING WHICH IS NOT IM MYSELF" (ND, 331, capitalization is Mailer's). His feeling towards the mountain changes from worship to hatred simply because Mount Anaka is now beyond his reach. This hurts him so badly, for it is unacceptable for a man who wants to keep everything under control.

Croft has a deep rage in his heart. After their suffering from the tough and long patrol, relations among the soldiers also become tense. When Croft finishes making the stretcher for Wilson, all the difficulties of the patrol annoy him again. However, the others are playing with a bird. The rage within him can no longer be held.

Croft crushes the bird in front of Roth. The death of the bird irritates the others in the platoon. Those soldiers all vent their anger on Croft. It is the time when the situation goes out of control, Hearn's intervention temporarily eases the tension. He orders Croft to apologize to Roth, a Private. In such a hierarchical organization, Hearn's order humiliates Croft enormously, just as Mailer depicts in the novel, "if Croft had been holding a rifle in his hand, he might have shot Hearn at this instant" (ND, 1047).

Shortly after, Croft prevents Martinez from sharing the information of a Japanese guard in the pass with Hearn, and consequently, Hearn is killed. After this, the platoon is under Croft's control again.

In the previous three confrontations with Mount *Anaka*, climbing Mount *Anaka* is only an idea, but this time, the idea is put into action. The others hope to turn back after Hearn's death. They all believe that the reconnaissance mission loses its strategical value, since no attack force could take the route—climbing Mount *Anaka*. Firstly, he urges to find his "answer" on the top of Mount *Anaka*. Secondly, if they quit, "then the thing he did to Hearn was wrong, and he had been bucking the Army, simply disobeying an order" (ND, 1262). Croft disallows Martinez to share the information that there is a Japanese guard in the pass with Hearn, which causes Hearn's treacherous death. What Croft does is severe violation of military discipline, causing a commander's death, in this occasion, Croft will definitely be sent to the martial court

and this is absolutely unacceptable for him. For the two reasons, Croft must push the platoon to climb Mount *Anaka*.

When the fourth time Croft sees Mount *Anaka*, the soldiers in the platoon are all very exhausted. Nevertheless, when they are approaching the peak, Croft feels another strange strain inside him, as Mailer says, “when Croft sensed that the top was near...each step he took closer to the summit left him more afraid” (ND 1374). But why is Croft afraid of approaching the summit? Although every word in the novel makes us believe that Croft is afraid of being too exhausted to reach the peak, on the contrary, the author of this thesis believes that he is afraid of reaching the peak. The change is fully revealed in the text. When they almost reach the peak, Croft accidentally smashes a nest, then dozens of huge hornets burst out of the nest and pursue them down the jungle. Shortly after the platoon fails to climb Mount *Anaka*, Croft feels relaxed. “Deep inside himself, Croft was relieved that he had not been able to climb the mountain” (ND, 1376). In addition to that, when Croft senses that the top is near, there is a voice in his ear, “he might have quit before they reach it” (ND, 1374). Climbing Mount *Anaka* has been Croft’s personal longing since he sees it the first time. Croft’s failure in conquering Mount *Anaka* ought to make him angry, however, for the first time, Croft, the most violent character in the novel, feels rested and peaceful after his failure.

The last confrontation with Mount *Anaka* is the time when they fall back to the base. Croft stares at Mount *Anaka* again, but his impression of the mountain alters from “an immense old gray elephant” (ND 881) to “the inviolate elephant” (ND, 1392). This time, he truly respects the power of nature from his heart, as Mailer illustrates: “Croft was rested by the unadmitted knowledge that he had found a limit to his hunger” (ND, 1378). Croft, the most violent character, starts to think seriously after being defeated by such massive violence from nature—the impenetrable jungle, the unclimbable mountain and the dozens of huge hornets.

Paul N. Siegel argues, “in failing to reach the peak of the mountain, Croft has failed to attain a grasp of the pattern. It eludes him” (292). Siegel is right, the failure of climbing Mount *Anaka* makes Croft understand “himself and much more. Of life. Everything” (ND, 1393). Otherwise, if he had reached the peak, he would not have found a limit to his desire.

## **Conclusions**

*The Naked and the Dead* as a war novel has a huge influence on American war literature since its publication. Although war is a form of massive violence itself, the violence that Mailer mainly concerns is in the U.S. Army. Croft as a totalitarian is lost in his enthusiasm for power. What is more, people like Croft even attempts to be omnipotent and rival God. While it is the invincible violence from nature that makes Croft know the limit of personal desire after his failure of climbing Mount *Anaka*.

Mount *Anaka* and huge hornets are all symbols of super power in nature. And by criticizing Croft’s failures, Mailer indicates that human can never dominate nature.

Quite a few readers believe that the outcome of *The Naked and the Dead* is covered with dark and gloomy colors, but as a matter of fact, Mailer intentionally leaves the world a little hope. Croft's awareness of the limit to his desire represents the return of personal will. But he has not been completely redeemed yet, as he has no freedom and he is still under the shadow of totalitarianism. Violence cannot lead individual to have redemption successfully, but it helps people to get to know themselves. Therefore, we can conclude only through massive violence can individuals have the chance to regain their personal will and identity. It is individuals' chances to step onto the journey of redemption.

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