A Postmodern Picaresque:  
The Limits of the Sovereign Self in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

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ABSTRACT

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The novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* by Hunter S. Thompson is often celebrated by popular culture and either ignored or derided by literary critics, while this thesis reads it in relation to the picaresque literary tradition with a consideration for both the mass appeal and the disturbing qualities that make it a messy and difficult text. At times it comes across as transgressive in the way it creates sovereign space for alternative lifestyles, sometimes referred to as freaks by the narrator, Raoul Duke, but those moments are fleeting. More often, the narrator and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, are reinscribing a dominant structure that abuses the less privileged and less mobile members of society, such as a hitchhiker, a maid, and a waitress. Moreover, the narrator even ends up working against himself and counteracting what he apparently values: mobility, individual sovereignty and liberty, and his version American Dream. Through a rapidly moving and episodic narrative structure reminiscent of the picaresque tradition but with a postmodern twist that amplifies and accelerates the format to such an extreme that it paradoxically paralyzes meaningful movement in a focused direction, the novel proves both appealing and unsettling. At such extremes, the potentially positive and negative aspects blur and flatten into a messy text whose meaning resembles the polar extremes and sharp contrasts Jean Baudrillard found so sublime about America itself.
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INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, Hunter S. Thompson and his novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* appear to have garnered increasing critical attention from literary academia after years of popularity. Since its publication the novel has been popular with the countercultural crowd, and has remained so through the decades along with a series of fresh variations. Within popular culture, Thompson and his works have yielded movies, comic strip and cartoon characters, and internet parodies and tributes in its exaggerated image. The novel *Fear and Loathing*, along with other works by Thompson, prompted a 1981 major motion picture directed by Art Linson and starring Bill Murray and Peter Boyle called *Where the Buffalo Roam* and then adapted again to film in the 1996 movie *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, directed by Terry Gilliam and starring Johnny Depp and Benicio del Toro. In addition to film representations, comic strip artists and cartoonists have created more than a few inky incarnations of the author, his narrative persona, and his stories, most notably Garry Trudeau’s character Uncle Duke in *Doonesbury* comics. More recently, his life story has been captured in graphic novel form in *Gonzo: A Graphic Biography of Hunter S. Thompson* by Will Bingley and Anthony Hope-Smith.

It is not surprising most of the representations, adaptations, and offshoots of the novel and the author have been on the big screen or in cartoon and comic form considering *Fear and Loathing* and the persona of Thompson lend themselves to exaggeration. In fact, grotesquely comical illustrations of the characters and events of the novel drawn in blotchy ink by Ralph Steadman have graced its pages since the first Rolling Stone magazine publication. However, the exaggerated, larger than life, and cartoonish self is both the source of the attraction and
repulsion of the novel, which has, until recently, made it more the fascination of popular culture than the subject of serious academic analysis.

Critics have had a hard time dealing with the novel. In criticisms and commentaries about the novel, three common approaches emerge: dismissive (which neglects the redeeming qualities), celebratory (which ignores the detrimental aspects), and ambiguous (which tries to find a middle ground, but too often erases any distinction). This thesis addresses a need for a critical analysis of the novel which considers both the promising and troubling dimensions of the novel without letting them cancel each other out. In synthesizing them, it is easy to blur rather than clarify their distinct qualities. Yet it is important to emphasize both the liberating, transgressive space the novel creates at the same time as the conservative, hegemonic space. By demanding that the reader accept both aspects and the messiness in between, the novel reveals the limits of sovereignty and how pursuing it to its extremes negatively affects those whose own sovereignty threatens the narrator's.
CHAPTER I

WHAT IS A POSTMODERN PICARESQUE?

As its subtitle implies, the novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* by Hunter S. Thompson tells the story of a narrator, Raoul Duke, and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, as they take to the road and storm Las Vegas in a frenzy of drugs and alcohol in search of the elusive American Dream. The American Dream can be framed in many ways, such as the middle class, white picket fence, nuclear family version of the American Dream, but the particular version of the American Dream found in *Fear and Loathing* is filtered through the eyes of Duke and emphasizes the dream of independence, freedom, liberty, and sovereignty. Through a postmodern picaresque narrative style, the narrator strives to find and assert a sovereign self—a constantly deferred promise in the pervasive myth of this American Dream. Using mobility, mischief, inversion of authority, and drugs to his advantage, the picaresque narrator, or picaro, creates some space, however small and brief its existence, for self-identified freaks like him. In this sense, he is a potent kind of countercultural hero, who sets out to claim space to fly his freak flag in a country that purports to be the land of the free and in a city billed as the adult playground for such pursuits.

However, perhaps more interesting than the successful but fleeting moments and spaces claimed by Duke are the more frequent and pronounced failures of this journey. These unsuccessful moments demonstrate the failings of both the American society as represented by the city of Las Vegas, which many critics and commentators have noted, and the limitations of the individualistic logic embraced and celebrated by the narrator, which is a side of the novel which has been largely overlooked. By embodying the logic of the American Dream to its
extreme, the novel reveals the limitations of sovereignty and liberty in terms of how it negatively affects both society and self.

The novel exposes these flaws not through explicitly soliloquizing about them, but by living them out in what he calls “edge-work” (Thompson 80). By edge-work, the narrator means pushing everything to its extreme for the sake of it. As Duke explains:

We were the Menace—not in disguise, but stone-obvious drug abusers, with a flagrantly cranked-up act that we intended to push all the way to the limit . . . not to prove any final, sociological point, and not even as a conscious mockery: It was mainly a matter of lifestyle, a sense of obligation and even duty. (Thompson 109-110)

In this excerpt, the logic of the novel is spelled out clearly. The postmodern picaro does not set out to prove a point or make any grand statements, but to test the limits of his lifestyle. It is the charismatic appeal of the narrator and his pursuit of the ill-defined American Dream through unbridled expressions of individual freedom that encourages the reader to “buy the ticket, take the ride” (Thompson 89), only to repeatedly repulse the reader when the ride suddenly stops, gets out of control, and takes a turn for the worse. This thesis focuses on the narrator’s self-proclaimed edgework and desire to push the limits of his body and mind as well as society because that attitude is what drives the text.

When reading the novel, it can be easy to miss a significant chunk of meaning in the text concerning the limits of the logic of the radical egocentrist because of the extremely polar nature of the novel and its language. It is tempting to zero in on either one extreme or the other. On one hand, the unbridled fun, irresponsibility, mobility, and textual layers depicted can draw the reader into a carnivalesque celebration of a deviant and transgressive countercultural lifestyle. On the other hand, the inflicted damage, the abuse of innocent (often female) bystanders, and the
lack of any character growth or lessons learned justifies denigrating it as an immature and misogynistic text. In fact, the text contains an ambiguity that leads to a kind of twisted humor that creates spaces for all kinds of deviant and grotesque bodies and simultaneously a violently re-inscribed androcentric hegemony against certain others. A comprehensive reading must account for both dimensions, as well as the meaning found in the way and order in which these dimensions unfold in the text.

The key to reading the novel is an acute awareness of the narrative perspective and the narrator’s relationship to the spaces and situations he stumbles in and out of. Through this perspective, the novel repeatedly attracts then repulses the reader, first with a transgressive promise of fun and pleasurable adventure, and then with shocking and painful descriptions of the failure of this promise. Enticing the reader is a necessary component to the visceral effect of the novel’s critique of the very ideals it pursues. The meaning of the novel becomes clear by first analyzing the ways in which it might be appealing to the reader, then discovering the critique it offers by disturbing the reader, and finally how it all operates within a cyclical pattern and what that pattern means. By the end of the novel, the rapid and constant movement leaves the narrator and the reader disoriented and feeling trapped in a circling madness that blurs the distinctions between agents and victims and leaves an uncertainty about the existence of sovereignty in the first place.

**Gonzo Journalism and the Picaresque Mode**

Thompson liked to call his style of writing Gonzo Journalism, a genre of one which is related to the New Journalism style of the time. As characteristic of Gonzo Journalism, the basic series of events in the novel apparently really happened: By all accounts, Thompson really did go to Las Vegas to cover the Mint 400 and later the District Attorney’s Drug Conference, as
covered in the book. However, the novel, told from the perspective of Raoul Duke as an obvious fictional avatar of Thompson, is clearly exaggerated and factually dubious. What remains is that the novel blurs the line between truth and lies, fact and fiction, and journalism and literature. It is frequently called Gonzo\(^1\) Journalism, a term coined by Thompson himself and also found in the name of the attorney in \textit{FLLV}, Dr. Gonzo. But what is Gonzo journalism? The brief reference to the term in the novel provides some hint. “But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism” (12). From this passage, the reader can gather that Gonzo journalism has something to do with creating, rather than finding, the story.

Indeed, Gonzo journalism describes a participative, first-person, subjective way of reporting that parallels the picaresque. The subjective, self-focused nature of the narrative reaches to the extent that the narrator \textit{is} the story, which is diacritically opposed to the supposed observational, third-person, and objective reporting of traditional journalism. In the subjective position of its reporting, it is closely related to New Journalism, but the role of the reporter is far more participative and disruptive in Gonzo journalism. As John W. Crowley notes, the story is more about the self than the events:

\begin{quote}
The secret of ‘Gonzo Journalism,’ as Thompson understood it, was first to recognize that anything an editor deemed worthy of coverage was inevitably some mindless diversion for the masses, such as the Mint 2400 Motorcycle Race or The Third National Institute on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the Vegas-based events that provide the occasion for the real story in \textit{Fear and Loathing} and all of
\end{quote}

\(^{1}\) The term “gonzo” itself has debated origin, but it is clear that Thompson was the first to bring into wider usage. Today, it can be found not only as a category of journalism, but also art, pornography, and cartoons.
Thompson’s major works. He hit the jackpot when he started purposefully never to cover the assigned story, except peripherally, but rather to make an account of his own hilariously bewildered peregrinations, sometimes in the form of notes taken on site but too cryptic for later decoding. (145)

Scott MacFarlane agrees with this self-centered definition of Gonzo Journalism, writing, “In this crazed journalism, we never come to learn who won the race or very much of what occurred at the Conference. The story is much more about Hunter S. Thompson’s drug-warped attempts to make sense of his assignment via the American dream of Vegas, which turns into both an indictment of his own sanity and that of the broader culture” (MacFarlane 177). It is this blurring between journalism and fiction, finding the story versus creating the story, that led Banco to describe the novel as “quasi-autobiographical semi-fictional reporting” (103). However, the self-centered narration that blurs between fact and fiction while travelling around the land encountering a variety of people in a series of episodic events has an older precedent than Gonzo Journalism, and that is the picaresque novel.

The picaresque of Golden Age Spain is most often discussed in relation to three influential literary works: Lazarillo de Tormes by an anonymous author, Guzmán de Alfarache by Mateo Alemán, and The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha by Miguel de Cervantes.² Debates about differences aside, these stories tend to share distinguishing features that have come to characterize the picaresque genre: first-person narration (often), episodic plot structure, themes of mobility (movement among social classes and movement throughout the

² Golden Age Spain, or the Siglo de Oro, describes an era in Spain during the 16th century (ca. 1492-1659) in which Spain experienced a prolific period of high artistic and literary productivity and creativity, and was also marked by dynamic shifts in social structure. During this period, the picaresque emerged and flourished, in part perhaps because of the democratization and proliferation of literature among more common readers with readily relatable themes and characters.
land), and incisive, but often not sustained or highly developed, social satire or parody.³

Like many picaresque novels, the only consistent narrative thread throughout Fear and Loathing is the first-person point of view of the narrator, and even that breaks down once in the novel. Picaresque scholar Ulrich Wicks emphasizes how, in contrast to the classical literary unities of time, place, and action,⁴ the only prominent unity in a picaresque story is the unity of the narrator’s identity (20). The narrator’s identity in the picaresque is the picaro, roughly translated as rogue.

Linking the social conditions of the Golden Age Spain that helped forge the picaresque with the contemporary appeal of such an experience, Francisco J. Sanchez and Nicholas Spadaccini state:

[ . . . ] if picaresque narratives and the whole phenomenon that we have called here the discourse of marginality in early modern Spain may still appeal to us today, it is precisely because they reveal a deep doubt at the heart of modernity, a doubt that refers to the questioning of the universal validity of the social structure that comes with this modernity. The emergence of modern subjectivity is a contradictory phenomenon in which one can detect the hints of social and political domination (304)

For the same reasons Sanchez and Spadaccini note the classic Spanish picaresque appeals to modern readers, Thompson’s postmodern picaresque appeals to readers because it reveals a doubt at the heart of modernity/postmodernity. As a postmodern picaro, the subjectivity explored

³ In Fear and Loathing the satire and parody is so shallow and fleeting that it is probably more accurately defined as pastiche, a term used by Frederick Jameson to describe a postmodern mode of mimicry and imitation also known as blank parody. Unlike more formal parody, blank parody or pastiche tends towards the superficial and fragmentary application of humorous mimicry.

by the narrator in *Fear and Loathing* problematizes nearly every aspect of the validity of the social structure of the Las Vegas embodiment of the American Dream. From this highly inquisitive, experimental, and problematic stance, the narrator tests the limitations and tolerance levels of a social structure supposedly predicated on the principles of liberty and uninhibited fun.

In *Road-Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque*, Rowland A. Sherrill argues that the contemporary picaro takes to the road to discover and affirm his sovereign self, in response to contemporary society that is oversaturated with media and social connectedness that robs the individual of coherent sense of self. With pushes and pulls from all around, the self is at a crisis point in contemporary culture, argues Sherrill. Perhaps this is what Duke implies when he says “There was also the socio-psychic factor. Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas” (Thompson 12). The undefined socio-psychic factor and fear of “weasels” closing in imply a threat to the self which might take many forms. In the novel’s moment, it seems that three likely categories of “weasels” are the government, private corporations, and the media, which are increasingly influential in our lives and connect us to others in more and more intimate ways. Because of the actions of corporations and the government and the way mass media allows us to see and hear everything that is going on all over the world, one struggles to find a space separate from these creeping influences. In the novel, newspaper excerpts and news clips on the television pervade the novel and influence the narrator’s thoughts and behaviors. In particular, the atrocities, violence, and corruption of the Vietnam War, the radicalization of the counterculture, and the shift from softer drugs taken with intent to expand consciousness (e.g. marijuana and hallucinogens) to harder drugs taken with the intent of getting fucked up (e.g. amphetamines and
cocaine) constantly operate in the background and periodically emerge in specific moments of the novel. Against this backdrop, Duke searchers for a cure to these ills of self and society.

**Historical Context**

For the contemporary American picaro, the road offers a potential solution to this crisis of the creeping influence of society, or what he calls the weasels closing in. While there might not be something especially contemporary nor American about the role of travel in finding and asserting one’s identity, this novel does take place in Las Vegas in the 1970s. The narrator is not pursuing a sovereign space in a vacuum; his quest is located in a particular place and time.

Contributing to the corroded, corrupt feel of the novel is the historical moment it is located in. Published in 1971, the novel was written in the period just after the influence of the hippie movement had begun to ebb. The promise of the Summer of Love had failed to deliver, and instead the faith in the central goodness of countercultural pluralism had resulted in radical violence. The narrator explains his version of the historical moment in the a third of the way into the novel:

> History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of ‘history’ it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.

> [. . . ] . . . You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning. . . .

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that.
Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave.

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (Thompson 67-68)

In the wake of the idealism of the ‘60s, the narrator finds himself in a cynical position in rather threatening and violent times. He refers to the violence of Altamont, the murders of the Manson family, and the thuggishness of the Hell’s Angels, all while the atrocities of Vietnam War play out on the television and in the newspaper. The counterculture is violent, the government is violent, the casinos are violent, and the people are violent.

In an insightful moment in the novel, the narrator breaks from the general flow of the plot to soliloquize about the significance of the post-hippie moment:

First ‘gurus.’ Then, when that didn’t work, back to Jesus. And now, following Manson’s primitive/instinct lead, a whole new wave of clan-type commune Gods like Mel Lyman, ruler Avatar, and What’s His Name who runs ‘Spirit and Flesh.’ Sonny Barger never quite got the hang of it, but he’ll never know how close he was to a king-hell breakthrough. The Angels blew it in 1965, at the Oakland-Berkeley line, when they acted on Barger’s hardhat, con-boss instincts and attacked the front ranks of an anti-war march. This proved to be an historic schism in the then Rising Tide of the Youth Movement of the Sixties. It was the first open break between the Greasers and the Longhairs, and the importance of
that break can be read in the history of SDS, which eventually destroyed in the
doomed effort to reconcile the interests of the ‘working class biker/dropout types
and the upper/mid Berkeley/student activists. (Thompson 179)

In this passage, the narrator of *Fear and Loathing* traces the arc of the counterculture from its
more innocent and naïve days with its belief in a higher good (of whatever form) and faith in
peace, love, and happiness as it descended into violence, class conflict, and radicalization. It is
against this backdrop that Duke strives to discover the American Dream and assert his own
sovereignty.

**Gonzo Individualism of the Postmodern Picaro**

The issue of choosing an apt term describing Duke’s take on extreme individualism is an
important but difficult one. I have already used terms such as sovereignty, liberty, and
individuality. What I mean to describe is an extreme type of individualism the limits of which
the narrator tests in the novel. Basically, the narrator and his attorney attempt to get away with
whatever they want regardless of laws, rules, social norms, and the rights of others. Is the
narrator an anarchist, a libertarian, or a libertine? Which term best describes the narrator’s
particular relationship with freedom and liberty?

Within the series of characteristics of the narrator, actions and events of the plot, and
various elements that contribute to the theme of the novel, which come from a particular way of
life but do not fly under any particular political banners, what is the appropriate term to describe
the person or the actions of the person? He is somewhat anarchic in spirit, but he is not an
anarchist. One could say the narrator is libertarian, but libertarianism carries a set of political
connotations the narrator does not seem to espouse. Perhaps one could describe him as a
libertine, but less in the realm of moral-free sexuality as in the case of 17th-18th century libertines
with which the term is largely associated (e.g. Marquis de Sade). Libertine is a more attractive term than libertarian because it narrows in on the individual and the more idiosyncratic actions and behaviors of a given individual, even if those actions may be counterproductive or contradictory to other actions or stated intentions of the individual, while libertarian demands a more coherent and consistent set of beliefs that fit within a larger set of political and philosophical beliefs. In other words, it is hard to escape the party affiliations that come with the term libertarian, while libertine is much more individual or even idiosyncratic. According to Walter Block, a scholar of libertarian economics and philosophy, a libertine:

…may be defined as a person who loves, exults in, participates in, and/or advocates the morality of all sorts of perverse acts, but who at the same time eschews all acts of invasive violence. The libertine, then, will champion prostitution, drug addiction, sado-masochism, and the like, and maybe even indulge in these practices, but will not force anyone else to participate. (121)

This definition of a libertine does fit the narrator’s desire to freely pursue whatever pleasures he wants but not to force others to partake in the same pleasures, yet it carries with it sexual connotations that are not very apparent in the narrator. The few times when sexual perversions become part of the novel, they are attributed to the attorney, Dr. Gonzo. In contrast, Duke comes across as largely asexual in the novel; his perversions are of a pharmacological rather than sexual variety.

Perhaps the best term to capture the narrator’s pursuit of individual liberty is picaro, in that it describes liberty which is variable, context-specific, informal, and based on the moment rather than consistent, universal, and politicized. In other words, the narrator pursues liberty in a

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5 The fact that Dr. Gonzo, a vaguely defined ethnic other who the narrator calls Samoan, is the only character with perverse sexual desires raises important questions about marking an ethnic other as sexually aggressive, but that is a topic too large for this thesis and too important to be treated briefly.
very idiosyncratic way, which the term picaro helps capture. Alternatively, one could use the term gonzo,\(^6\) which Thompson coined himself to describe his particular brand of subjective, idiosyncratic pleasure-seeking liberty. Gonzo is a appealing because it is the most precise term—it exists for the very purpose of describing the type of libertine and picaresque ways of the narrator, but it suffers from a general lack of shared understanding and currency. Sure it describes Duke’s ways exactly, but then what is gonzo? All that has happened is now gonzo needs to be defined. To simplify matters, let it stand that picaro/picaresque and gonzo will be used most frequently and sometimes interchangeably, and more precisely let gonzo describe the type of *postmodern* picaresque style found in *Fear and Loathing*.

The difficulty finding the appropriate terms the narrator’s type of freedom, liberty, and sovereignty stems from the struggle with these very concepts within the novel. As an apparent drug-obsessed libertine, the narrator clearly seeks a space for himself, a place to fly his freak flag, so naturally he reveres sovereignty. This sovereign space is where he can do whatever he wants free from interference. Because of this obsession with personal freedom, liberty, and sovereignty, he is in search of the holy grail of personal liberty known as the American Dream. At the same time, the narrator and the novel as a whole struggle with the concept of sovereignty. While the narrator clearly attempts to assert a sovereign self and valorizes the icons that supposedly embody it (e.g. Horatio Alger and the manager of the casino), the very journey becomes a joke mocking the idea that sovereignty exists. In other words, the novel simultaneously celebrates sovereignty while it exposes the fact that it does not exist and is only a hollow myth that drives a deluded society to clamor for it. It is difficult to express in words the way the novel depicts sovereignty and the American Dream because of the way the narrator

\(^6\) The term “gonzo” itself has debated origin, but it is clear that Thompson was the first to bring into wider usage. Today, it can be found not only as a category of journalism, but also art, pornography, and cartoons.
simultaneously criticizes it and desires it for himself. He is enthralled and fascinated by its appeal while horrified and repulsed by the notion that it is really a hollow promise that wields so much power over people.

As a powerful and confident individual, the narrator’s persona and energy is intoxicating and appealing. The promotion of rugged individualism and pioneerism has historically been embedded in mainstream US ideology. The foundational texts of American culture studies such as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* by have firmly established the significance of this dominant myth in our history, and most scholars since have been working with this central thesis ever since its publication in 1950. Even though contemporary scholars have taken a critical stance on many of the assumptions of the text—reading against the grain from different perspectives other than the dominant individualistic, pioneering, white male perspective—still for the most part their various readings have added to the narrative in order to demonstrate the existence of alternative experiences rather than challenging the influence of the individualistic pioneer attitude.\(^7\) In other words, most scholars acknowledge the hegemonic influence of the rugged (mostly white) masculine individual that is often promoted by mainstream society, even as such scholars offer counter-narratives. It is doubtless that *Fear and Loathing* and the cavalier attitude of Duke operates within this dominant narrative, even as it at various points resists it, exposes its limits, celebrates it, and perverts it.

\(^7\) See for example Manuel Luis Martinez’s counter-emphasis on the communitas/civitas struggle of the Americano/Chicano experience as a literary alternative to the dominant individualistic white male narrative that exists even in countercultural literature in his book *Countering the Counterculture.*
CHAPTER II

THE (MYTHICAL) ATTRACTION OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND SOVEREIGNTY

While this thesis reads *Fear and Loathing* as containing both highly attractive and highly repulsive elements, it is important to note the ways that these elements are not always easily separated. Even from the beginning, the novel straddles the edge between attraction and repulsion. Still, both elements are present and can be analyzed separately in order to get at some of the meaning generated from the dynamic interplay between them. Thematically, the novel can perhaps best be described as oscillating between (and intermingling) appealing and repelling qualities of a highly individualistic, selfish, and libertine lifestyle.

In a very compelling way, the novel’s celebration of individual liberty attracts readers. The novel appeals to the desires to: escape the day-to-drudgery of work and home, shirk responsibility, invert authority, hit the open road, express freedom, alter consciousness through drugs, trick others and be in on the joke, spend and consume freely, and break the rules. The novel draws the reader in through the lure of vicariously enjoying the performance of these often highly regulated behaviors.

Furthermore, by enacting this ultra-individualistic self in search of the American Dream in Las Vegas, the narrator is in the position to critique just to what extent *it does not exist*. As a result of his picaresque adventures in a city that capitalizes on the American Dream like no other in the very nation that created the myth, the narrator’s exploits expose the absent center of the Dream and the hypocrisy of the social structure that promises it. So the novel’s appeal comes both in the form of living out a fantasy of irresponsible revelry and in the social critique that results. The reader can enjoy both vicariously living out the fantasy with the narrator as well as the pleasure that comes with being savvy to the hypocrisy and atavism of the social structure. It
therefore appeals the individual who both romanticizes the American Dream and yet cynically knows it does not exist and perhaps never existed in the first place.

The promise of a space for a sovereign self to reside in undisturbed peace, liberty, and freedom appeals to many readers. Duke’s own take on it has an extra layer of appeal to some readers because much of the journey is tongue-in-cheek. Duke, and by extension the reader, is privy to the ways in which the American Dream is phony, and yet is still attracted by it and perversely desires to see just how corrupt and empty it is. This is the appeal can be found in many books with cult followings as Thomas R. Whissen claims in his book *Classic Cult Fiction*. As he investigates the attraction of cult classics and their countercultural capital, in which he includes *Fear and Loathing*, Whissen identifies the common appeal as the sense of inside knowledge the narrator, and vicariously the reader, has. Citing Holden Caufield in *The Catcher in the Rye* as another example and tying it to Duke’s narration in *Fear and Loathing*, Whissen argues the appeal these narrators have to certain readers is while they are phony like everyone else, they differ from others in that he is aware of his phoniness and admits it, whereas the problem is with those who do not own up to their phoniness (xxxi).

**Drawing the Reader into His Sphere**

The novel begins *in medias res* with the narrator and his attorney driving down an open stretch of highway “somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold” (Thompson 3). This sets the chaotic, off-kilter pace of the novel that at once intrigues and concerns the reader. Clearly, it will be exciting, but something could easily take a turn for the worse. In the first few pages, the story begins to materialize, but with every word, more questions than answers emerge. We learn the narrator is a journalist out to cover a motorcycle race called the Mint 400, but why the drugs? Rather than explain any reason for the
drugs, the narrator takes this opportunity to take an inventory of the drugs that are along for the trip, which amounts to about $300 worth:

The trunk of the car looked like a mobile police narcotics lab. We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers…and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls. (Thompson 4)

For most readers, probably even including experienced drug users, this amount and variety of drugs would not be encountered in a lifetime, let alone assembled in one place. It almost guarantees something never-before-seen will happen, which elicits a kind of perverse giddiness. The reader just knows these drugs will be consumed; the narrator would not display a collection like that early on in the book never to mention it again. It is like a pharmacological variation on the literary rule known as Chekhov’s gun: if you present a loaded gun in the first chapter, someone better fire it in the second or third chapter, except in this case, instead of a loaded gun it is an arsenal of “extremely dangerous drugs” (Thompson 4).

Equally appealing as the promise of copious amounts of drugs and the exciting events that will inevitably ensue is how the narrator acquired the $300 to purchase the drugs in the first place. The money appears to be an advance on the story Duke is contracted to cover, wired to him from the main offices somewhere in New York City. Explaining the beauty of this scheme to Dr. Gonzo, Duke brags:

Jesus, just one hour ago we were sitting over there in that stinking baiginio, stone broke and paralyzed for the weekend, when a call comes through from some total

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8 Russian novelist and playwright Anton Chekhov expressed one form of this general rule in a letter and perhaps more than once afterwards in conversations. Biographer Ernest J. Simmons says that Chekhov repeated the point later, which may account for variations in how the rule is phrased (190).
stranger in New York, telling me to go to Las Vegas and expenses be damned – and then he sends me over to some office in Beverly Hills where another total stranger gives me $300 raw cash for no reason at all . . . I tell you, my man, this is the American Dream in action! We’d be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out to the end. (11)

In Duke’s interpretation of events in this passage, the money is virtually free, completely divorced from any obligation to perform his work, and that is how he intends to treat it. The idea that one can travel on someone else’s dime before any work has even been completed with the intention of going crazy on drugs and alcohol in Las Vegas appeals to the desire to escape the tedium of day-to-day life and work. However, for most readers enacting that desire, especially to the extremes Duke and Dr. Gonzo do, would likely result in losing one’s job, getting jailed, and/or dying. Therefore, the reader can live vicariously through the narrator and his attorney, getting a taste of the desire to escape the minutia of daily life and enact a carefree, liberated self without any of the risk.

Early on in the novel, the two encounter a hitchhiker who in some ways operates as a stand-in for the reader’s perspective this early on in the novel. Here we meet a naïve young man, attracted by the appeal of the narrator’s red Chevrolet convertible dubbed the Great Red Shark, and ready to join in on the fun:

My attorney saw the hitchhiker long before I did. ‘Let’s give this boy a lift,’ he said, and before I could mount any argument he was stopped and this poor Okie kid was running up to the car with a big grin on his face, saying, ‘Hot damn! I never rode in a convertible before!’
‘Is that right?’ I said. ‘Well, I guess you’re about ready, eh?’ The kid nodded eagerly as we roared off. (Thompson 5)

Like the hitchhiker, the reader has opted to go along for the ride with two men who at this point we know little about. While the reader has a little more of an idea than the hitchhiker of the craziness these two have in store, at this point it seems like it could be fun—not unlike riding a convertible for the first time.

As the narrator and his attorney begin to talk to the hitchhiker, communication and mutual understanding soon flies out the window. Aggravating the problem is the fact that the drugs have dissolved the narrator’s ability to discern what he thinks from what he says and whether he is speaking too quietly or too loudly. “How long can we maintain? I wondered. How long before one of us starts raving and jabbering at this boy? What will he think then?” (5). The narrator tries to explain things, but after obviously failing, he resigns to the futility of sharing the meaning. “I was puzzled, frustrated,” he surrenders. “Was there no communication in this care? Had we deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts?” (Thompson 8).

Fortunately, the communication troubles exist between the characters, and not the narrator and the reader. Just when communication has broken down completely between the characters, the narrator fills in some background for the reader. While the hitchhiker remains in the dark has probably begun to wonder if his life is in danger, the reader gets a small reprieve and learns that the reason the narrator is speeding down this highway with a trunk and head full of heinous chemicals. The next chapter fills in the details the reader needs to grasp a little more of the story, and the diegesis also helps to shift the reader away from identifying with the hitchhiker and into the narrator’s sphere instead.
Positioned against the hitchhiker’s naivety and ignorance, the narrator possesses a kind of experience and wisdom which he has now partially confided in the reader. Because of his experience, the narrator is somehow superior to our fellow traveler:

I am still vaguely haunted by our hitchhiker’s remark about how he’d ‘never rode in a convertible before.’ Here’s this poor geek living in a world of convertibles zipping past him on the highways all the time, and he’s never even ridden in one.

It made me feel like King Farouk. (Thompson 17)

Given these two alternative lifestyles, the reader starts to identify more with the narrator and his King-Farouk-like status, rather than with the poor geek of a hitchhiker. The reader is no simple fool after all, so, unlike the hitchhiker, chooses to continue the trip and see what happens, for better or worse.

Although the reader is more like the hitchhiker at first, an unsuspecting passenger along for the ride with the two protagonists, it does not take long before the hitchhiker ditches the ride and the reader continues on with the protagonists and whatever weirdness comes with them:

My attorney was cracking another amyl and the kid was climbing out of the back seat, scrambling down the trunk lid. ‘Thanks for the ride,’ he yelled. ‘Thanks a lot. I like you guys. Don’t worry about me.’ His feet hit the asphalt and he started running back towards Baker. Out in the middle of the desert, not a tree in sight. (Thompson 19)

Now that the hitchhiker is gone, it is just the narrator, his attorney, and the reader. “Good riddance,” says the attorney, and for a reason. The hitchhiker is not one of them; he represents a threat to their way of life, to their quest to do whatever the hell they want.
In the process of trying to explain the purpose of this trip, first unsuccessfully to the hitchhiker and then relatively more lucidly to the reader, the narrator refers to the search for the American Dream in Las Vegas, which for him seems to mean recovering a promise of freedom and sovereignty that had at some point been lost, if indeed it ever existed in the first place:

But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country--but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that. (Thompson 18)

Almost as soon as he mentions it, the sincerity of this purpose is called into question. Suddenly, the attorney veers the car off the road, stops in the gravel shoulder of the road, and slumps over the steering wheel complaining of heart pains, which the narrator solves with amyls from the drug kit (Thompson 18). The grandiose words the narrator had just spoken about the national character and the fantastic possibilities available to those with true grit were undercut as soon as they were uttered.

**Inverting Authority at the DA’s Drug Conference**

Early on in the second part of the novel, Duke infiltrates the DA’s conference on drugs. In this setting, Duke’s deviant position juxtaposes humorously with the ignorant authoritarianism of the conference. The narrator starts by describing the antiquated sound system, which turns out to be but one indication of the backwardness of the anti-drug forces:

A year or so earlier I had been to the Sky River Rock Festival in rural Washington, where a dozen stone-broke freaks from the Seattle Liberation Front had assembled a sound system that carried every small note of an acoustic guitar –
even a cough or the sound of a boot dropping on the stage—to half-deaf acid victims huddled under bushes a half mile away.

But the best technicians available to the National DA’s convention in Vegas apparently couldn’t handle it. Their sound system looked like something Ulysses S. Grant might have triggered up to address his troops during the Siege of Vicksburg. (Thompson 137-138)

This passage playfully juxtaposes two diametrically opposed cultures in order to offer an interesting critique of the technical capabilities of the law. However, this passage contains larger implications about the knowledge, ability, and savvy of law enforcement.

Immediately after noting the lack of audio sophistication of this conference, the attorney scoffs at the claim the speaker makes that the joint butt is called a roach because it resembles a cockroach. “What the fuck are these people talking about?” he asks, “You’d have to be crazy on acid to think a joint looked like a goddamn cockroach” (Thompson 138). The speaker continues to dissect the terminology of the drug culture, which according to the narrator amounts to a “compendium of state bullshit” (Thompson 139). Despite stumbling upon a “prehistoric” conference, the narrator observed that most of the cops who were from Middle America were eating up the info.

Sensing an opportunity to have a little fun with these naïve cops, the narrator and his attorney sidle up on either side of a cop from Atlanta who is drinking at the bar. They proceed to feed him outrageous stories of drug-addicted, sex-hungry, human-sacrificing witches chopping off heads and pulling out hearts and glands in order to consume the chemical effects they possess. Being naïve and eager to learn, which is to say gullible, the poor guy eats it all up. The two protagonists leave him wringing his hands and wondering if he should tell his wife about
what he just learned or leave her blissfully unaware of the awful realities he has just become privy to (Thompson 145-9). The entire time, the reader is in on the joke, which is partially what makes it so entertaining. The reader knows the narrator and his attorney are only spinning tales with thread from the officer’s worst nightmares purely for the effect and to get a rise out of him. And the officer bites, ‘‘Hell, I really hate to hear this,’’ he said quietly. ‘‘Because everything that happens in California seems to get down our way, sooner or later. Mostly Atlanta, but I guess that was back when the goddamn bastards were peaceful’’ (Thompson 148). The fact that he is a cop and still so gullible to fall for absurd tales that prey on his faulty assumptions about the threats of West Coast, urban life, and the counterculture is what makes it all the more pleasing.
CHAPTER III
THE LIMITS OF SOVEREIGNTY

It might be a mistake to assume that this American Dream only appeals to the mainstream culture, when instead it more likely holds varying degrees of allure for virtually everyone—including mainstream, counter-, minority, and subaltern cultures. It appealed to Kerouac as it appealed to Rockefeller as it appealed to Langston Hughes—even as he discovered it was a dream deferred—just as it appeals to the voiceless masses, although not all in the same way. The common appeal lies in the promise of successfully rising up and attaining a space of thriving sovereignty and liberty for one’s identity, no matter what that identity might be, in theory anyway. In reality, this version American Dream, to the extent that it is accessible to anyone, is more accessible to the white, heteronormative, masculine members of society. And yet this ideology circulates widely, offered up as the definition of a successful life even to those who do not fit such an identity.

The American Dream certainly fascinates Duke as he ventures to claim a piece of it himself, as a self-defined gonzo freak, drug connoisseur, and gun enthusiast on behalf of other gonzo freaks. Yet in this pursuit he runs up against many walls, as explored at length in this chapter and the next, because the American Dream is not really his for the taking, although as an upper middle class professional white male with access to disposable income, he can certainly get closer than many others. That is to say, he is privileged enough to reach the edge and witness the vortex of the Dream, just before it pushes him away and leaves him once again on the move. The other characters, however, lack much of the privilege to get as close as Duke, and suffer at the expense of Duke’s own savage journey to the heart of the American Dream.
One can assume that most of the other characters in the novel harbor some form of the American Dream, considering how pervasively it runs through American culture, and Duke even speculates as much when it comes to the faceless masses at the Circus-Circus “humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner” as they shove money into the rows of slot machines (Thompson 57). But even the rest of the characters in the novel, such as the waitresses, maids, hitchhikers, and clerks, probably covet the American Dream as they toil around minimum wage and are crushed beneath the weight of all the others clamoring for a piece, including most explicitly Duke himself. For them, the Dream is a nightmare, although they probably fail to recognize it as such. However, for the reader, and occasionally for Duke himself, the nightmare of the American Dream becomes all too apparent, creating a repulsive reaction to what was initially appealing.

**When the Sovereign Self Encounters Others**

The problematic aspects of sovereignty are revealed whenever the narrator gets too close to the edge—the limits of the American Dream. This includes most notably his encounters with others, the edge where the space of the sovereign self clashes with the sovereign space of the others. The edge is also tested through his use of drugs, in which the freedom of taking drugs is usurped by the control drugs take over the self. Finally, the limits of the American Dream are seen in his travels, in the edge between free and forced movement. Furthermore, the problem the novel reveals about the narrator’s brand of individualism is that it eschews all personal responsibility. At some points, the cause of certain behavior is attributed to microscopic forces, such as nature or the effect of the drugs. At other points, the cause of events is attributed to macroscopic concepts of fate or the government.

The edge between the self and others is tumultuously encountered throughout the novel.
The egocentric logic of the narrator is so extreme and intense that interaction with others invariably results in volatility. With such gonzo libertine extremism, anyone and everyone poses a potential threat. Not surprisingly, the narrator and his attorney are highly reactive. Moreover, the narrator’s sense of self seems to be so inflated that he even perceives non-existent/imagined others, as in vague paranoid phrases like “the weasels start closing in” (Thompson 12) and his twisted and paranoid fantasies of being indicted by the courts (Thompson 177). No one can be trusted in the eye of his bloated, volatile ego, not even his partner in crime and attorney, Dr. Gonzo. In other words, because of Duke’s hyper-individualistic, egocentric perspective and compromised state of mind, everything and everyone presents a potential threat, including inanimate objects. The reader finds Duke figuratively tilting at windmills, calling to mind a parallel with Miguel de Cervantes’s classic picaresque novel Don Quixote, except instead of windmills Duke is tilting at neon signs that appear to him as electric snakes (Thompson 27) and innocent bystanders who morph into reptilian form (Thompson 24).

A fitting quote bandied about whenever anyone talks about freedoms and liberties goes something like “your right to swing your arm ends where my nose begins,” and it aptly expresses the limits of liberty. The problem with Duke’s brand of liberty, though, is he is constantly swinging his arms about with no regard to the noses of others, figuratively speaking. As a result, he strikes his fair share of noses, but always manages to twist into his own self-preserving logic in order to minimize his culpability. At times, because of the grotesque and surprising juxtaposition of extreme images and words, it can come across as humorous, but at other times unsettling. John Crowley’s criticism lands squarely on the fact that the humor of the novel often comes with a disturbing price. “A regular laff [sic] riot!—as long as the reader overlooks how the humor typically depends on the pranksters’ unselﬁsh conscious exploitation of little people,
especially women toiling at minimum wage, powerless to be other than expendable comic butts” (Crowley 144). While Crowley ignores the possibility of finding humor in the novel while still acknowledging its exploitation of women (they are not mutually exclusive), his comment does land squarely on the most troubling aspect of the novel. The notable others who suffer from these encounters, whom Crowley likely had in mind with the words “women toiling at minimum wage,” include the waitress the attorney calls Back Door Beauty, the unnamed maid from linen service, and the young traveler called Savage Lucy.

The scene with the waitress occurs at a diner on the outskirts of town, in North Las Vegas. The narrator had already characterized these outskirts as the wasteland of the region:

North Vegas is where you go when you’ve fucked up once too often on the Strip, and when you’re not even welcome in the cut-rate downtown places around Casino Center.

This is Nevada’s answer to East St. Louis – a slum and a graveyard, last stop before permanent exile to Ely or Winnemuca [sic]. North Vegas is where you go if you’re a hooker turning thirty and the syndicate men on the Strip decide you’re no longer much good for business out there with the high rollers… or if you’re a pimp with bad credit at the Sands… or what they still call, in Vegas, ‘a hophead.’ This can mean almost anything from a mean drunk to a junkie, but in terms of commercial acceptability, it means you’re finished in all the right places. (155)

In this part of town, those not welcome in the more tightly managed casinos populate the area. It is here that the narrator and his attorney visit a rundown diner to get some food and take a break from the craziness of the city proper. This bleak description conveniently precedes the encounter with the waitress and ostensibly excuses the abuse to come. Since she is working in a place
means she is “finished in all the right places,” she is used to and perhaps deserves abuse. Without provocation, Dr. Gonzo randomly propositions her with a vulgar note on a napkin: “Back Door Beauty?” (159). The waitress gets understandably offended and tells the two to get out before she calls the police. Then things turn really ugly:

The woman was screaming again: ‘Pay your bill and get hell out! You want me to call the cops?’

I reached for my wallet, but my attorney was already on feet, never taking his eyes off the woman . . . then he reached under his shirt, not into his pocket, coming up suddenly with the Gerber Mini-Magnum, a nasty silver blade the waitress seemed to understand instantly.

She froze: her eyes fixed wildly on the blade. My attorney, watching her, moved about six feet down the aisle and lifted the receiver off the hook of the pay phone. He sliced it off, then brought the receiver back to his stool and sat down.

(159)

The experience traumatizes the poor woman. As the two characters leave, “The waitress was clearly in shock. The sight of the blade, jerked out in the heat of an argument, had apparently triggered bad memories. The glazed look in her eyes said her throat had been cut. She was still in the grip of paralysis when we left” (160). That is the last we hear of this waitress, which is convenient for the self-centered narrative Duke shares with the reader, but one can imagine her needing counseling, or at least the support of a close friend or family member to help her cope with this unnecessary and traumatic event.

The most troubling aspect of this scene is the senselessness of the actions. There is no discernible reason for treating the waitress this way, and it simultaneously reveals the
hypocritical oppression perpetrated on behalf of the protagonists. While the narrator criticizes the heinous actions of the government, he commits heinous actions of his own. Earlier in the novel he justifies his actions, though, as being minor in the grand scheme of things, “Reading the front page made me feel a lot better. Against that heinous background, my crimes were pale and meaningless. I was a relatively respectable citizen—a multiple felon, perhaps, but certainly not dangerous. And when the Great Scorer came to write against my name, that would surely make a difference” (74). Unfortunately, such reasoning hardly justifies the actions that occurred in the diner. As MacFarlane remarks, “the only justification for these actions must stem from the belief that two wrongs make a right” (186). MacFarlane remarks on the fallacy of this justification and how it is hardly an effective creed to live by.

Yet MacFarlane’s observation is right for the wrong reasons. He comes to this point when considering the actions the narrator wages against institutions, but neglects his against individuals. MacFarlane criticizes Duke’s logic in terms of his stance that “big business and big government are so corrupt that the abuse of their property in this random way is legitimized” (186), and goes on to say his irresponsible behavior puts him in a limited position to offer a satirical critique. MacFarlane claims the impotency of Duke’s critique in light of his own counterproductive behavior is the “most disturbing aspect of Thompson’s work” (186). However, MacFarlane’s sentiment, although not unwarranted, is misplaced. Duke and his attorney’s destruction of public and private property held by big business and government is not the most disturbing aspect of the novel; the abuse of innocent and undeserving individuals, particularly women like the waitress, is.

Another scene in which the main characters traumatize a woman toiling at minimum wage occurs in their hotel room. The housekeeper happened to stumble in on their debauched
living conditions in their hotel, which scares the main characters into thinking she will report them to the authorities. To remedy this situation, they threaten her, lie to her, and convince her to never bother them again:

I had been asleep when the maid came in that morning. We’d forgotten to hang out the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign . . . so she wandered into the room and startled my attorney, who kneeling, stark naked, in the closet, vomiting into his shoes . . . thinking he was actually in the bathroom, and then suddenly looking up to see a woman with a face like Mickey Rooney staring down at him, unable to speak, trembling with fear and confusion (181).

The attorney, already enough out of it to mistake the closet for the bathroom, perceives the maid as a threat. He explains to Duke, “‘So I came out of the closet in a kind of running crouch, still vomiting, and hit her right at the knees…it was pure instinct; I thought she was ready to kill me…and then, she screamed, that’s when I put the icebag on her mouth’” (181). Shifting the perspective from the attorney to the maid, one can imagine doing the cleaning rounds, stumbling upon what a scene the narrator describes as “a site of some disastrous zoological experiment involving whiskey and gorillas” and getting assaulted by a large naked man with vomit on himself (180-1).

As if the scene was not bad enough already, it actually becomes worse. As the narrator and his attorney panic at the thought of their irresponsible gig finally being up, they react with such blind aggression that one would think the maid had messed with the cubs of a protective she-bear. Indeed, insofar as a bear mother instinctively identifies the well-being of her cubs as indicative of her own survival, the bare-naked beast of an attorney lashes out at the maid’s
intrusion into his lair and responds to a perceived threat she poses to his baby: his drug-filled lifestyle. At this point, the narrator’s description becomes even more graphic:

Yes. I remembered that scream . . . one of the most terrifying sounds I’d ever heard. I woke up and saw my attorney grappling desperately on the floor right next to my bed with what appeared to be an old woman. The room was full of electric noise. The TV set, hissing at top volume on a nonexistent channel. I could barely hear the woman’s cries as she struggled to get the icebag away from her face . . . but she was no match for my attorney’s naked bulk, and he finally managed to pin her in a corner behind the TV set, clamping his hands on her throat while she babbled pitifully: ‘Please . . . please . . . I’m only the maid, I didn’t mean nothin’ . . . ’ (181)

To remedy this situation, in all his drug-induced brilliance, the narrator quickly hatches and enacts a plan to pretend to be a law enforcement agent: “I was out of bed in a flash, grabbing my wallet and waving the gold Policemen’s Benevolent Assn. press badge in front of her face. ‘You’re under arrest!’ I shouted. ‘No!’ she groaned. ‘I just wanted to clean up!’” (182). The maid’s words speak volumes in this situation. She just wanted to clean up, and instead she has been assaulted and then threatened with arrest under a ruse. And yet, as the novel reads, this behavior seems justified, nay, even necessary because she represents the end to the precious private and sovereign space the narrator and his attorney have haphazardly constructed for themselves. Also, as the narrator describes, she looks like Mickey Rooney, which somehow seems to justify treating her poorly.

In addition to the abuse of working-class women in these two scenes, the narrator and his attorney deceive, harass, and abuse another woman for an extended period of time. Her name is
Lucy and she is perhaps the most prominent female characters in the novel. She is the only woman the narrator cares to name and the one who occupies more than a page or two of the text. Her situation is also very disturbing. For some reason, the narrator calls her “Savage” Lucy. He meets her for the first time when he enters the hotel room he and his attorney are staying at and she is unexpectedly there: “‘Ah, home at last!’...but the door hit something, which I recognized at once as a human form: a girl of indeterminate age with the face and form of a Pit Bull. She was wearing a shapeless blue smock and her eyes were angry” (Thompson 110). Then, he saw his attorney “stark naked, standing in the bathroom door with a drug-addled grin on his face” (Thompson 110). What was going on here?

Throughout the majority of the novel, the exact series of events is foggy, and obscure references to past occurrences are never clarified. Such is the case when the narrator encounters Lucy: “I nodded to Lucy, who was eyeing me with definite venom. I was clearly some kind of enemy, some ugly intrusion on her scene...and it was clear from the way she moved around the room, very quick and tense on her feet, that she was sizing me up. She was ready for violence, there was not much doubt about that. Even my attorney picked up on it” (Thompson 111).

One of the most striking features of these passages is the beastly description of Lucy, which effectively identifies her as an unwelcome Other. She is a pit bull, full of venom, and quick on her feet. Her animalistic descriptions help justify her treatment. If the narrator denies her humanity, then the actions taken against seem necessary, almost generous at times. However, this is the logic of a self-centered man who cares only about the self, fragmented as it may be, and very little about others.

In response to Lucy’s attitude towards the narrator, the attorney jumps in on behalf of his partner. ‘Lucy!’ he snapped. ‘Lucy! Be cool, goddamnit! Remember what happened at the
airport...no more of that, OK?’ (Thompson 111). It is not clear what happened at the airport, but it sounds vaguely threatening. It sounds as if she got violent at the airport, and the attorney taught her a lesson, so to speak. No more of that. Of course, maybe she flipped out at the airport and drew the attention from the authorities, without the attorney harming her at all. Perhaps he is just warning her not to do that anymore. Still, it sounds vaguely threatening.

And anyway, how did she join the fringe these two occupy in the first place? Where did the attorney find her, and how did he get her to the hotel room? Apparently, she is a naïve, star-struck religious freak with an artistic bent from Kalispel, Montana running away from home for the fifth time in six months, this time to Las Vegas in order to try to meet Barbara Streisand and show her the forty or fifty obsessively painted portraits she made of her. The attorney met her on the plane and gave her acid, though she has not even ever had a drink before (Thompson 114). Wherever she came from and whatever her story, all the narrator cared about was how to get rid of her. She posed a threat if she ever came to her senses and realized what was going on. The narrator sums up the grim reality of the situation:

[...] what worried me [...] was the likelihood that she would probably be just sane enough, in a few hours, to work herself into a towering Jesus-based rage at the hazy recollection of being picked up and seduced in the Los Angeles International Airport by some kind of cruel Samoan who fed her liquor and LSD, then dragged her to a Vegas hotel room and savagely penetrated every orifice in her body with his throbbing, uncircumcised member. (Thompson 116)

If the narrator’s assumptions about what happened in the hotel room are true, this situation looks on the surface and would likely look to any jury of peers like a case of drugging a runaway girl of “indeterminate age” (underage?), kidnapping her, and raping her. If anyone found out about
this, “That would finish us,” the narrator concludes, “They would track us down and probably castrate us both, prior to booking” (Thompson 116). Castration is a fitting punishment for the narrator to fear, seeing as though the most important principles in his life are his male-oriented sovereignty and individuality, which are represented by phallic power and therefore threatened by castration.

There is no concern for Lucy’s well being in this scene, however. To the narrator, she is all but worthless as a human being—in fact, in his description of her she is nearly a beast. All she represents for him is a threat, “a potentially fatal millstone around our necks” (115). The only choice, he decides, is to get rid of her, tell her they are taking her to see Streisand, and pay a driver to drop her off at the Americana casino. Either that or “take her out to the desert and feed her remains to the lizards” (Thompson 118). The latter, though, is really only a warped option that occurred to the narrator in a paranoid fit—nothing serious. He remains rational enough to determine that this choice “seemed a bit heavy for the thing we were trying to protect: My attorney” (118). His attorney, meanwhile, has a different solution in mind. He proposes reporting her to the Montana police and letting them deal with her. The narrator neatly sums up the deviousness of that solution, “‘First you kidnap the girl, then you rape her, and now you want to have her locked up!’” (Thompson 118).

Earlier on, the narrator had a similarly twisted thought of abusing the poor girl in order to deal with her, eliminate her as an intruder and a threat:

I sat down on the bed and casually reached into my satchel for the Mace can...and when I felt my thumb on the Shoot button I was tempted to jerk the thing out and soak her down on general principles, I desperately needed peace, rest, sanctuary.
The last thing I wanted was a fight to the finish, in my own hotel room, with some
kind of drug-crazed hormone monster. (Thompson 111)

Never mind that she had done nothing wrong, and if anything was the victim of deception and
abuse already on behalf of his attorney, to the narrator Lucy was nothing more than disturber of
peace and sanctuary. She was a female “hormone monster” invading his male dominion. This, of
course, is unacceptable to him.

Once they got rid of her, they were back to their old ways as if the events never
happened. Soon, the scene returns to taking mescaline, listening to the tunes on the radio, finding
a good seafood restaurant to satiate a “powerful lust” for red salmon, drinking rum, going for a
swim, and all sorts of other hedonistic consumptions and pleasure-seeking behaviors (119). Ah,
the narrator seems to be feeling, now that the female intruder, the fatal millstone, is out of the
picture, our masculine sanctuary and cavalier ways can returned. However, she returns like a
ghost of past sins:

‘Mister Duke? Yes, you have two messages. One says, ‘Welcome to Las
Vegas, from the National District Attorneys’ Association.”’

‘Wonderful,’ I said.

‘…and the other,’ he continued, ‘says, ‘Call Lucy at the Americana, room
1000.’ ‘

‘What?’

He repeated the message. There was no mistake.

‘Holy shit!’ I muttered.

‘Excuse me?’ said the clerk.

I hung up. (Thompson 121)
Clearly, the narrator fears women in the novel. He especially fears this particular woman, Lucy, whom he calls “Savage” Lucy and describes as a mongoloid, drug-crazed hormone monster with pit-bull-like features and the look of a beast.

Marking Lucy as bestial continues a common trope in the novel of marking every other person in various degrading ways, such as with animal comparisons or with an (often dubious) ethnic identity. Here appears to be the narrator’s logic of sovereignty: in order to claim a space for himself, the narrator distinguishes himself from others by marking their otherness. By marking them, the narrator identifies himself as not them. That way, he is able to claim a unique space apart from the creeping influence of a multitude of others. Throughout the novel, the narrator marks the other people in the story predominately by ethnicity, class, and gender.

The narrator ethnically labels his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, a Samoan, although expresses some uncertainty about the classification. In truth, Dr. Gonzo is based on the Mexican-American writer, social activist, and lawyer Oscar Zeta Acosta, but in the novel he becomes a vaguely defined ethnic other, while the precise details do not matter. The narrator explains who Dr. Gonzo is to the hitchhiker early on in the novel: “‘I want you to understand that this man at the wheel is my attorney! He’s not just some dingbat I found on the Strip. Shit, look at him! He doesn’t look like you or me, right? That’s because he’s a foreigner. I think he’s probably Samoan. But it doesn’t matter, does it? Are you prejudiced?’” (Thompson 6-8). The last question in that quote is interesting because the narrator turns his own prejudice on the hitchhiker, ridding himself of it. This passage contains a common trope in the novel in which the narrator expresses an awful sentiment or prejudice about another, only to immediately distance himself from it by attributing the point of view to someone else. The way he simultaneously uses offensive terms and rejects them and/or attributes them to others can be confusing, leading some to argue the
novel reinforces racist, sexist, and all sorts of prejudiced beliefs, while others argue it is critical
of such perspectives. What it actually does is distance the narrator from both kinds of people,
ethnic others and people who are prejudiced against ethnic others.

Lucy gets marked as an Other with such bestial terms because, like the other women in
the novel, she is problematic for the narrator. Her introduction into his world represents an end to
the way of life he and his attorney has cultivated throughout the novel. The narrator claims the
main threat she poses is if she wises up and reports him and the attorney to the authorities, an
outcome that the narrator imagines will lead to a variety of lifestyle-ending consequences:
castration, prison, and disbarment (for the attorney). All of the consequences signify the same
thing: an end to their manhood. Manhood means different things to different people, but for the
narrator it includes mobility, power, and liberty.

In the very ego-centric logic of the narrator, therefore, the fact that this young woman
poses a risk to his way of life, who he is as a man—his profession, his mobility, and his
phallus—justifies the twisted and vile solutions he and his attorney considers for her. Her well-
being is of no concern; all that matters is she must be disposed of. As a result, getting her locked
up and feeding her remains to lizards are feasible solutions. Fortunately, they have enough sense
and semblance of humanity to ultimate dismiss those solutions for the relatively noble solution of
tricking her into believing they are taking her to see Streisand, dumping her off at another hotel,
and feeding her an elaborately false story over the phone that involves the attorney nearly killing
the narrator and getting raided by the police mid-conversation.

**The Limits of the Sovereign Self**

As Duke tests the limits of sovereignty in the novel and ends up harming others in the
process, he also encounters the limits of what his own body can take, limits often pushed through
drug use. Drugs actually play a similar role to travel. Banco explores this idea deeper than any other. Banco emphasizes the shared meanings of tripping in both the travel and intoxication senses of the words, noting the ways in which physical travel and altered states of mind mirror each other. If, as Sherill argues, movement and travel in the picaresque fashion is a way to retrieve the sovereign self, then drugs might very well follow the same purpose. The role of drugs within the question of sovereignty is interesting. At the highest level, most governments, especially the U.S., have draconian laws prohibiting recreational use of drugs. At that level, the sovereignty of the libertine who wants to do whatever he pleases as long as he harms no one other than himself is seized by the government. Yet, obviously, such government prohibitions do not actually stop the flow of drugs into the country, so a person can usually find drugs if he so pleases, with the possible risk of jail time of course. As long as he accepts that risk, he is relatively free to find and consume any illicit drug. So, he can still assert his will to take drugs despite the government. However, once the drug is consumed, sovereignty is forfeited to the effects of the drug, to varying degrees. So while the individual freely asserts his sovereignty by choosing to take the drug, he immediately loses it bit by bit as the drug takes hold.

In one extreme example, the narrator consumes a drug that leads to his paralysis, nearly the most severe loss of sovereignty one can imagine besides death itself.

I was so wired that my hands were clawing uncontrollably at the bed spread, jerking it right out from under me while he talked. My heels were dug into the mattress, with both knees locked . . . I could feel my eyeballs swelling, about to pop out of the sockets.

[ . . . ]
I tried to smile. ‘Well . . . nothing worse . . . no, this is worse . . .’ It was hard to move my jaws; my tongue felt like burning magnesium. ‘No . . . nothing to worry about,’ I hissed. ‘Maybe if you could just . . . shove me into the pool, or something . . .’

‘Goddamnit,’ he said. ‘You took too much. You’re about to explode. Jesus, look at your face!’

I couldn’t move. Total paralysis now. Every muscle in my body was contracted. I couldn’t even move my eyeballs, much turn my head or talk.

[. . .]

Death. I was sure of it. Not even my lungs seemed to be functioning. I needed artificial respiration, but I couldn’t open my mouth to say so. I was going to die.

Just sitting there on the bed, unable to move . . . well at least there’s no pain.

Probably, I’ll black out in a few seconds, and after that it won’t matter.

(Thompson 133-134)

This scene is the epitome of drugs completely seizing control of the body and arresting any movement at all. For a man who clearly celebrates movement, it symbolizes a complete relinquishment of his sovereignty, or, as Banco observes, “The drug has betrayed Duke’s body and stripped it of its agency” (Banco 168). This scene thus signifies how “drugs are both appealing and horrifying to Duke” because they totally disregard the rational subject and its autonomy (Banco 168).

The limits of the narrator’s sovereignty are also apparent in the way the chemical substances the narrator consumes are described as seizing control of his functions. The narrator and his attorney have full control over what they ingest. More importantly, the very act of
ingesting illicit drugs against the wishes of state authority is an assertion of freedom and sovereignty. However, the way the substances they ingest interact with their body chemistry and usurp their sovereignty from their inside out exposes the limits of their sovereignty. In other words, consuming various controlled substances is at once an act of rebellion against the social order and submission to the powers of the drug. The fact that the narrator emphasizes this Catch-22 of drug use demands that it not be read as either a consequence-free celebration of drugs or a sharp criticism of them.

**The Limits of Travel**

Travel in the novel is similar to drugs; while it presents an opportunity for freedom and can be a means to reassert sovereignty, at times it is highly proscribed. For instance, in one scene, Duke is fed up with what Las Vegas has to offer and he has a feeling his lies and damages are about to catch up to him, so he decides to hit the road. Unfortunately, the narrator rues, “the only hope is to somehow get across three hundred miles of open road between here and Sanctuary” (84). The fear of the open road is because out there he would stand out like a sore thumb and would be a sitting duck. His choice of transportation only makes matters worse “there is only one road to L.A.—US Interstate 15, a straight run with no backloads or alternate routes, just a flat-out high-speed burn through Baker and Barstow and Berdo” (83). He must take this road to return to the sanctuary of L.A., or, as he says, “safety, obscurity, just another freak in the Freak Kingdom” (83). The appeal of L.A. is its openness, within which he can move around as he pleases, and its diversity of weirdos, among whom he can blend. In contrast, the path to this relative comfort zone is straight and narrow, where, as the narrator quotes from a billboard, “YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN’T HIDE” (85). The reader gets a sense of contrasting versions of travel: while the open road promises freedom and sanctuary, it is also highly
constrained and forced.

Not only is there only one road between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, which physically limits Duke’s ability to freely travel, but the need to constantly be on the move is a trap in itself as well. In other words, Duke is trapped in motion. As Banco further notes:

The oscillation across states (and state lines) has become so rapid that the subject, trapped in the liminal space between realms or caught in the vanishing point of a vortex somewhere in the Mojave Desert, is no longer moving. The abdication of free will apparent in Duke’s subjection to (rather than deployment of) mobility, a recurring theme in *Fear and Loathing*, brings the pleasures of mobility into question in much the same way the disembodying effects of ether and adrenochrome bring into question the idea that psychoactive substances expand the boundaries of selfhood and perception. (182)

Therefore, while travel, can be a method to reassert sovereignty, it also threatens it.

One of the prominent lines in the novel, often quoted out of context to promote various countercultural activities and philosophies, is “buy the ticket, take the ride” (Thompson 89). In these words, one can read the dual nature of the narrator’s experience with sovereignty. The first clause is the purposeful action of buying, while the second clause is about passive submission to whatever the ride has to offer. Internally, on the physiologic and psychological level, this statement relates to the act of taking drugs as mentioned in the previous section. One can intentionally choose to ingest a substance, but the flip side is doing so means submitting to the nature of the drug and how it interacts with the body and mind. But the quote also relates to the external world of society as well. The narrator and his attorney can choose to insert themselves into a scene in whatever state of mind they are in, but they must also submit to the series of
events that unfold as a result of the reactions of others. In this latter sense, the narrator and his attorney are the embodiment of the drugs while society is like the body’s reaction to the drugs. This analogy does not go too far, though, because the agency of the drug and society are messier concepts than the agency of the narrator.

In a simplified sense, then, the novel is about the narrator buying the ticket and taking the ride. But the problematic aspect of this journey is while the mobility of the narrator reads as a means to assert some sovereignty (as opposed to being trapped or imprisoned), taking the ride is, as noted above, involves a certain amount of submission to the design of the ride. Michel deCerteau call’s this phenomenon “travelling incarceration,” which describes the moments in which mobility and immobility converge, such as the experience of travelling in a train with nothing moving inside or out (111), i.e. taking the ride. It is this aspect of the novel that leads Banco to emphasize how travel and movement in the novel is often highly circumscribed (180). As a result of this circumscription of travel in the novel, Banco claims “Following the discursive slippage between drugs as exciting and enervating and drugs as addictive and soporific, Duke’s travel becomes normalized and narcotized” (179). Even when the narrator breaks the rules of the ride, so to speak, it is only in fleeting moments that do not amount to much in the grand scheme.

To boil it down, the novel begins on the road speeding down the highway, ends with him claiming to be a Man on the Move, and throughout the bulk of the text has no time to rest. He explicitly states early on “But there was no going back, and no time to rest. We would have to ride it out” (3). Again, the way movement is framed in these words is highly limited. He cannot go back, he cannot rest, and he must ride it out, which pretty much sums up the way he is forced to stay in motion.
CHAPTER IV
GOING IN CIRCLES

The novel’s edge-work dynamic of appealing to the widely shared desire to achieve the freedom implied by this particular version of the American Dream only to push it to disturbing lengths, thereby exposing its limits and dangers, does not develop slowly over the course of the entire novel, but rather rapidly and repeatedly throughout the novel. Like typical picaresque novels, Fear and Loathing is episodic in structure, so the appeal-turning point-disturbance pattern does not follow the general five-point pyramid structure for dramatic narrative (i.e. exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution).\(^9\) Instead, one finds multiple episodes that cycle through those elements quite frequently and rapidly, without a clearly identifiable overarching climax. If it did follow the more traditional structure, it would come across as a morality tale in which the narrator takes too many drugs and lives too fast, suffers a scare when things go too far, and learns a lesson about how to properly toe the line between obedience and liberty. However, the fact that the narrator does not seem to learn from any mistakes and repeatedly subjects himself and the reader to the limits of the human body and society in similar or even amplified fashion as the novel progresses signifies something different. There is no moral or lesson to be learned; nobody changes or evolves; everything remains the same. Instead, life for the narrator is an ever-repeating, never-ending cycle of pleasure and pain that revolves around a hollow deferred promise of liberty, sovereignty, and freedom known as the American Dream, and according to the narrator, all we can do is buy the ticket, take the ride, and just keep on moving.

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\(^9\) This common structure, most notably described by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des Dramas*, is more often found in complete form in classical dramas, while the various modern and postmodern only roughly resemble this structure if at all.
Not only are episodic, repeating cycles part of the structure of the narrative, they are also found in the symbolism of the novel. The first scene in which circling becomes a prominent image is in the Mint 400 race. This race is the first story the narrator is supposed to cover for *Sports Illustrated* magazine, while the narrator seems more interested in his own quest for the American Dream. At the race, which occurs in the middle of the Nevada desert just outside of Las Vegas, motorcycles race around a dirt track about so many miles long, creating a whirling dust cloud that prefigures the cyclical, spinning, and messy events and images that recur throughout the text. Remarking on the dust cloud kicked up by the bikes, the narrator observes:

> Beyond that point the incredible dust cloud that would hang over this part of the desert for the next two days was already formed up solid. None of us realized, at the time, that this was the last we would see of the ‘Fabulous Mint 400’ – By noon it was hard to see the pit area from the bar/casino, one hundred feet away in the blazing sun. The idea of trying to ‘cover this race’ in any conventional press-sense was absurd: It was like trying to keep track of a swimming meet in an Olympic-sized pool filled with talcum powder instead of water. (Thompson 38).

Here, the reader gets one of the first tastes of the way the imagery of the novel mirrors its structure. Just as the narrator’s chaotic and unstable actions make it difficult to grasp the meaning of the text as they repeatedly oscillate and cycle between excitingly enticing and upsettingly revolting, the action of motorcycles circling around a dirt track in the middle of a bone dry desert kicks up a thick cloud of impenetrable dust that makes it impossible to cover the race. Instead of dust obscuring the view, though, when reading the novel it is the multiple fragmented and unpredictable events that trouble and cloud its meaning.
Reinforcing its significance, cyclical imagery appears again in another scene, but with a more prominent undertone of fun and horror. The narrator and his attorney are on a merry-go-round-style bar in the Circus-Circus that slowly rotates separate from the rest of the casino floor. In his compromised state, the attorney struggles to exit the rotating bar:

I got him as far as the edge of the bar, the rim of the merry-go-round, but he refused to get off until it stopped turning.

‘It won’t stop,’ I said. ‘It’s not ever going to stop.’ I stepped off and turned around to wait for him, but he wouldn’t move . . . and before I could reach out and pull him off, he was carried away. ‘Don’t move,’ I shouted. ‘You’ll come around!’ His eyes were staring blindly ahead, squinting with fear and confusion. But he didn’t move a muscle until he’d made the whole circle.

I waited until he was almost in front of me, then I reached out to grab him—but he jumped back and went around the circle again. This made me very nervous. I felt on the verge of a freakout. The bartender seemed to be watching us.

Carson City, I thought. Twenty years.

I stepped on the merry-go-round and hurried around the bar, approaching my attorney on his blind side—and when we came to the right spot I pushed him off. He staggered into the aisle and uttered a hellish scream as he lost his balance and went down, thrashing into the crowd. . . rolling like a log, then up again in a flash, fists clenched, looking for somebody to hit. (Thompson 49-50)

While the merry-go-round is designed to be fun and entertaining, for Duke’s attorney Dr. Gonzo, something about the edge between the moving platform and the stationary floor deeply disturbs and frightens him. One can only speculate how this threshold affected him in his altered state of
mind, but based on the degree of his fear and the hellish scream he utters when Duke finally pushes him over the edge, the issue runs deeper than simply the way it challenges his physical balance and dexterity. Something about the contrast between moving and stationary platforms, and from his vantage point the disjunction between some objects, people, and reference points seemingly stationary while really moving and others apparently moving though really stationary frightens him to his core.

The threshold poses an ontological threat and not just a physical challenge. In the abstract sense, the threat the merry-go-round presents to Dr. Gonzo’s sense of being symbolizes the threat at the edge of sovereignty in relation to others, and hints at the dynamic that causes the sudden repeatedly occurring repulsions in the novel. From the self’s point-of-view, two equally feasible ontological realities present themselves, one egocentric and the other allocentric. In the former, the self is the reference point against which other external objects are measured, while in the latter the frame of reference is based on the external environment, independent of one’s current location in it. In other words, either I am stationary and the rest of the world revolves around me or there is some other external point or series of points that remain stationary and I revolve around them. The promise of the American Dream and the intertangled values of liberty, sovereignty, and freedom rest on the egocentric platform, while the allocentric alternative reality generates anxiety about the falseness of the American Dream. For Dr. Gonzo, in that moment on the merry-go-round, these alternate realities meet at a threshold which deeply unsettles him.

The merry-go-round scene implies this ontological insecurity is a recurring aspect of life. In the context of the repeating cycles of ups and downs and constant movement, the line “It won’t stop…It’s not ever going to stop” (49) becomes a thematic summary of the pattern of the

10 These are not necessarily either/or realities, and much of the messiness and complexity of the novel and the real world experience suggests that both are functions of a larger reality in which the ego- and allocentric alternatives push and pull and periodically clash with each other.
novel that warns the reader against expect a rest any time soon. Throughout the novel, the narrator and his attorney constantly move without rest as if rest would mean the end of life as they know it. Similarly, the dynamic between alternate realities of the self and others continues unabated, just as the text constantly moves from trangressively creating space for freaks to fly their freak flag to violently reinscribed masculine hegemony. There is no rest in this regard until the novel ends, and even then it is clear from the final words when the narrator affirms he is a Man on the Move that this way of life will continue unceasingly (Thompson 204).

Bringing the cyclical symbolism and its connection to the narrator’s quest for personal sovereignty to its violent head is the vortex. In one scene, the narrator describes the location of the American Dream as existing within a vortex. ‘‘We came out here to find the American Dream, and now that we’re right in the vortex you want to quit.’’ I grabbed his bicep and squeezed. ‘‘You must realize,’’ I said, ‘‘that we’ve found the main nerve’’ (47-48). The vortex is an apt symbol for how the narrator perceives the ideal of the American Dream: violently circulating and spinning around an empty center. The violent imagery invoked by a vortex, along with the charged symbolism of the main nerve, mirrors the violent and turbulent actions of the narrator and his attorney as they encounter a world with alternative and occasionally directly contrary interests. The vortex symbolizes the American Dream and encapsulates the relationship between self and others with its following characteristics: an absent, vacuum-like center; a dynamic interaction between push and pull counterforces; and an increasing degree of energy and violence at the threshold between its absent center and the circling push/pull counterforces.

**Locating Sovereignty in the Circling Madness**

When the narrator gets close to the American Dream, which is the symbolic representation of individual liberty and sovereignty, he describes it as a vortex. This image is
fitting for the brand of liberty Duke pursues, which is ultimately an amplified and exaggerated version of the more typical American Dream: expressing individuality through consumption. A vortex brings to mind a spinning funnel like a tornado that consumes everything in its path. It also suggests a hollow center that acts as a vacuum which drives the spiraling energy of the vortex.

The location of the vortex of the American Dream in the Circus-Circus Casino adds to the understanding of the symbol. The Circus-Circus Casino has two dimensions that represent the consumerist version of liberty: the spectacle and the stacked odds. Moreover, both dimensions are driven by and revolve around a deferred and absent promise of the American Dream, whose emptiness is like the hollow vacuum at the center of a vortex. The casino side of the Circus-Circus represents the stacked odds that siphon money out of the pockets of dupes who buy into the rags-to-riches promise of the American Dream and the jackpot mentality. The American Dream and American society banks on the very idea that such stories are true, while over time the many who lose their money to the house greatly outweighs the few who strike it rich. Moreover, the more the society celebrates the few who hit the jackpot, the more appealing the myth becomes and the more people flock to it. Over time, it erodes away the wealth of the masses to the advantage of the house—the few corporations at the top.

As the perfect marriage of entertainment (circus) and gambling (casino), it is hard to imagine a more fitting location for the American Dream and a more fitting symbol of capitalism. The person who best embodies that Dream is the manager of the Circus-Circus, a man with “his own circus, and a license to steal, too,” whose life is “pure Horatio Alger, all the way down to his attitude” (191). In other words, to the narrator he seems to have the liberty and sovereignty to
do what he wants, and to make a fortune doing so. This, in the world of *Fear and Loathing*, is the American Dream.

To keep people from catching on to the long con that is the casino-like capitalism, they must be distracted and entertained. Here the spectacle\(^\text{11}\) does its job. Duke describes the spectacle of the Circus-Circus at length:

> The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich. The ground floor is full of gambling tables, like all the other casinos... but the place is about four stories high, in the style of a circus tent, and all manner of strange County-Fair/Polish Carnival madness is going on up in this space. Right above the gambling tables the Forty Flying Carazito Brothers are doing a high-wire trapeze act, along with four muzzled Wolverines and the Six Nymphet Sisters from San Diego... so you’re down on the main floor playing blackjack, and the stakes are getting high when suddenly you chance to look up, and there, right smack above your head is a half-naked fourteen-year-old girl being chased through the air by a snarling wolverine, which is suddenly locked in a death battle with two silver-painted Polacks who come swinging down from opposite balconies and meet in midair on the wolverine’s neck... both Polacks seize the animal as they fall straight down towards the crap tables—but they bounce off the net; they separate and spring back up towards the roof in three different directions, and just as they’re about to

\(^\text{11}\) The term spectacle here borrows from the French Situationist Guy Debord’s definition of spectacle as the inverted image of society relations between people have been replace by relations between people and commodities, in which “passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity” (thesis 4). The effect of this inversion is a transfixed and passive consumption, to the obvious benefit of the casino.
fall again they are grabbed out of the air by three Korean Kittens and trapezed off to one of the balconies. (Thompson 46)

One of the first things a reader might notice about this passage is the loaded ethnic markers, which as stated previously is a way the narrator distances himself from the outside world. In addition to the ethnic markers, the passage also presents a spectacle. This spectacle somewhat frightens the narrator, but presumably its purpose is to put the visitors into a mindless stupor and drive them to put money into the machines. In Duke’s observation, it all embodies the famous maxim often apocryphally attributed to P. T. Barnum “there’s a sucker born every minute.” In other words, “on all the upstairs balconies, the customers are being hustled by every conceivable kind of bizarre shuck” (Thompson 46). It is the fact that it celebrates the spectacle, promotes itself as an adult playground, and promises of riches that makes the Circus-Circus so insidiously successfully at separating a man from his money.

In other words, although it brands itself as a carnivalesque and transgressive space, the casinos are actually strategically designed and highly controlled spaces to get people in the casino and gambling as much as possible for as long as possible. As Kurt Borchard observes in “From Flanerie to Pseudo-Flanerie: The Postmodern Tourist in Las Vegas,” casinos design their layout in very specific ways to manipulate behavior in the most desirable and profitable way from the standpoint of the casino. One commonly cited example the fact that casinos lack clocks and windows so that patrons are never aware of the time, making “property owners’ space on the Strip […] profitable twenty-four hours a day” (Borchard 201). Indeed, according to French Situationist Ivan Chtcheglov, “the more a place is set apart for free play, the more it influences people’s behavior and the greater is its force of attraction. This is demonstrated by the immense prestige of Monaco and Las Vegas—and Reno, that caricature of free love—although they are
meme gambling places” (para. 29). In other words, people are most often duped into behaving the way they are expected when they think they are playing.

From Duke’s vantage point, he can see all the ways the casinos control and manipulate the people, and yet he is largely blind to his own lack of sovereignty in such situations. Scanning the indeterminate masses at the casino, Duke observes:

Now off the escalator and into the casino, big crowds still tight around the crap tables. Who are these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they’re real. And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a lot of them—still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (Thompson 57)

The American Dream, of course, represents the pervasive values of upward mobility, rags-to-riches fame, and individual liberty. It is worth imagining although from his subjective point of view the narrator describes these tourists as an amorphous mass of clones, each probably harbors the belief of being somehow different, somehow the next big thing. For them, Las Vegas offers the chance to live the Dream like no other place. They, like many, are under the influence of the American Dream, and are getting sucked in by its vortex-like forces. Furthermore, it does not take much critical distance to see that the narrator too is attracted by the lure and luster of the Dream, although in his own way. While he is sensitive enough to the con to freak out when he loses two dollars in one of the machines because he knows it is based on stacked odds in the house’s favor, he is not savvy enough to explicitly see how he plays into the game in other ways.
Part of the anxiety and tension underlying the novel results from the narrator’s vague sense of his own collusion, though he never overtly verbalizes it.

As a result of being the jaded cynic who comments on the system from the “outside” who is also simultaneously caught up in it, the novel presents a dystopic worldview with no apparent escape. Analyzing some of the symbols of the novel, Stull’s insight into the tension between the opposing but intimately linked forces of the self and society becomes clear. It is important to keep in mind that in keeping with the picaresque mode, the social critique offered by *Fear and Loathing* comes as much from emphasizing the ways in which society prohibits and punishes the narrator’s way of life as much as it has created it. The irony of the narrator’s identity is that it is bound up as both a product of society and as an outcast punished by the very society that created it. In *Fear and Loathing*, various abstract concepts loom over the text as a symbolic representation of the greater forces at work, which could be interpreted as at least partially related to society at large or some half-formed idea of fate, such as the Great Magnet (95), the Great Commander (29), and the Great Scorer (74). The invocation of these “Great” figures comes whenever events do not turn out as the narrator expects or desires. The Great Magnet represents an irresistible attraction to an unavoidable fate, the Great Commander represents ultimate authority and alludes to the power of the military, and the Great Scorer represents a tally of the good and evil of the world, amongst which his own exploits seem insignificant. While he does not believe in their actual existence, the narrator uses all of them to displace his anxiety about his own control and sovereignty over forces greater than himself.

Paradoxically, the narrator blames these greater forces, including society at large, based on the notion that their order *must be* screwed up if they would produce and foster the existence of someone like the narrator, and yet simultaneously punish him: “And now look at me: half-
crazy with fear, driving 120 miles an hour across Death Valley in some car I never even wanted. You evil bastard! This is your work! You’d better take care of me, Lord… because if you don’t you’re going to have me on your hands” (Fear and Loathing 87). Although the narrator explicitly questions the idea of a benevolent God, citing society naïve optimism as the failure of the sixties counterculture (Fear and Loathing 179), he still invokes a divinity from time to time, as in this excerpt, to represent a kind of fate or perceived agency greater than the narrator, or in other words, society at large. However, in the next section it becomes clear how the invocation of greater forces, along with the submission to the power of drugs, reveals the problematic undercurrent that swallows those other individuals with different lifestyles, such as the maid, the hitchhiker, and the waitress, which works against the promotion of individual freedom and sovereignty the narrator is seemingly trying to assert because it denies it to others. The text’s problematic relationship with sovereignty and liberties of the self leads to violently reinscribing a dominant masculine identity over harmless female characters. It also reveals the limits of any sovereignty an individual presumes to have.

The implied inescapable hollowness at the core of the American Dream and the volatility that comes with Duke’s monster reincarnation of it serve as a critique of the way of life Duke simultaneously seems to promote and celebrate. This puts the text in a strange position in relation to the idea of sovereignty and the American Dream. The inherent problem within the text in the novel is they are caught up in the messy context of postmodern spectacle and the myth of class mobility that greases the wheels of the consumerist society it attempts to critique at the same time.

Yet by exposing the emptiness at the core of the American Dream, the novel raises the question of what is at the core of the sovereign self in a more general sense. What pervades the
text is an anxiety, or one might say a fear and loathing, about the self. This anxiety comes from the sense that the self, like the American Dream, is a hollow vortex around which circulates a cloud of signifiers, approximating the self but never quite pinpointing it. In the book *Literary Selves*, James N. Stull emphasizes how at its core the novel is not about the search for the American Dream as much as it is a quest to find and establish the self, which also harkens back to Rowland Sherrill’s observation that a common element of picaresque and road novels is travelling in order to recover the sovereign self. Stull remarks “Traditionally, the quester’s physical journey represents a psychological search for identity” (99). He concludes that “For Thompson, the quester’s experience is not so much the means by which self-discovery takes place, in which identity is created and confirmed, as it is the means by which the personal and metaphorical selves are obviated or destroyed by a punitive and destructive order” (99). Here, Stull gets at the way in which Duke’s sense of self is locked in a process of continual creation and destruction (exaggeratingly speaking) as a result of the interaction between the self and society. While he searches for the American Dream and attempts to assert his own sovereign self, he repeatedly fails because of the way the self is always already contextualized in society, which undermines the self of self from the beginning.

Reflecting on the always already incomplete sense of the self and the emptiness of sovereignty, the novel ends in an unresolved, liminal, and unsettled state. In the last words, the narrator is still: “a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident” (Thompson 204). When the narrator concludes he is a Man on the Move, not only is he describing his way of life; within those words the unstable phenomenon of subjective identity is implied—constantly deferred and defined in relation to others.
Moreover, nothing has happened and he is still in the same place where he started. One might think that a novel that includes such abuse, irresponsible behavior, and no resolution or sense of change in either the plot, society, or the narrator would lack meaning. And yet, the redemptive qualities and the occasional subversive spaces, as fleeting as they are, actually make the novel seem in sync with messiness of real life, despite all the obvious exaggerations and lies within the novel, where the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Fittingly for this theme, near the end of the novel, the reader is a bit stunned and confused, not entirely sure what just happened. As the narrator stumbles out of the drug store with his box of amyls he scammed from the pharmacist without a prescription and into the open air of Denver, Colorado, it resembles the feeling of the morning after, the light of day blinding the eyes, every little sound throbbing inside the head, and the faint memories steadily growing stronger that something went horribly wrong, mistakes were made, and a mess of trashed hotel rooms and convertibles, unpaid bills, and abused victims has been left in the wake. The passive construction of this summary is apt because the story has muddied events so much that sovereignty and agency are questionable. It is clear some horrible things happened, but it is not clear who is to blame or really who had control over the situation. Such an unclear, uneasy state in which agency and sovereignty are problematic concepts suspect to scrutiny and questioning is exactly the state of mind that one ought to leave the text with.

**Endless Cycles: Where Do They Lead?**

Not only is the cyclical pattern and imagery of the novel simultaneously exciting and revolting, and not only does it result in a messy text, but at times it even seems to represent a kind of paralysis. However, this is not a paralysis caused by a lack of movement or a deadening of action, but rather one caused by excessive overstimulation, acceleration, and fragmentation to
the point that the ability to respond short circuits. Lindsay Michael Banco makes a similar point
and even extends it to include the social implications and commentary it offers:

When the revolving bar in Circus-Circus, which Manuel Luis Martinez claims
satirizes the notion of sixties ‘revolution,’ becomes particularly nauseating to Dr.
Gonzo, Duke tells him: ‘It won’t stop [. . .] It’s not ever going to stop.’ Instead of
allowing them the free mobility emblematic of foundational American
traditions—the form of postwar travel mythologized by Beat generation writers in
particular—the endless circularity of this false ‘revolution’ offers instead a vortex,
a hegemonic imposition upon its countercultural practitioners. Like the endless
cycles of the Mint 400 and the paralysis of ether and adrenochrome, it turns Las
Vegas from a psychedelic ‘trip’ into a disabling trap. (179)

While Martinez and Banco emphasize the social connotation of “revolution” in the circling of the
revolving bar, I, as stated above, see it as representing the crisis of individual identity that occurs
when confronted with alternative realities. But what is common in both interpretations is that the
endless cycles that paradoxically create a sense of paralysis and lack of movement even as it is
caused by excessive movement aptly represents the trouble with the text in general. The very
aspects that excite some readers and trouble others, and often both at the same time for the same
reader, create a sense of paralyzed helplessness about the novel. Questions flood in where
previously held assumptions have evacuated. Who has done what? Who is responsible? To what
extent does agency or sovereignty exist? What has actually happened? The text is constantly
moving forward, but where has it gone? It seems despite all the action and movement, the novel,
the narrator, and the reader seem simultaneously trapped in an endless cycle that leads nowhere.
The most troubling aspect is that throughout the antics, the reader has been in on it the entire time, which has a dual effect. On one hand, the reader has attained the privileged position of an insider and confidante, someone who shares in the pranks and is privy to the secrets of the drug culture. The reader gains a sense of experience and wisdom against the atavistic ignorance of the dupes in positions of authority. On the other hand, the reader vicariously partakes in the abuses against innocent victims and experiences the ugly side of things when the fun turns into harm.

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize just how rapidly the novel cycles back and forth, because the pace is essential to how its effects are generated. There are multiple points in the novel in which the novel turns on its head jarringly. At times it is absurdly funny, and at other times disturbing. One moment occurs early on, when the hitchhiker is still in the car with the narrator and his attorney. Duke is trying to assert the importance of their journey, and for a brief moment it sounds promising and exciting: “But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country—but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that” (Thompson 18). Yet in the immediately following paragraphs, it becomes offensive and then ridiculous:

My attorney understood this concept, despite his racial handicap, but our hitchhiker was not an easy person to reach. He said he understood, but I could see in his eyes that he didn’t. He was lying to me.

The car suddenly veered off the road and we came to a sliding halt in the gravel. I was hurled against the dashboard. My attorney was slumped over the wheel. ‘What’s wrong?’ I yelled. ‘We can’t stop here. This is bat country!’ (18)
Suddenly, after building up the grandiose meaning of the trip, the narrator racially discriminates against his attorney and unfoundedly accuses the hitchhiker of deception. Yet before the offensiveness of those lines can set in, suddenly the car, like the narration itself, jerks off course for unknown reasons and the narrator starts yelling about the dangers of bat country, referring to the huge bats he had hallucinated swooping around the car in the opening pages of the novel. At no point can the reader get his or her bearings before another abrupt shift in tone and content occurs. It is continuously tense and unsettled. And this is only one example of many in a constant series of abrupt shifts that keep the story off-kilter and driving towards the end.

At the very end of the novel, Raoul Duke says of himself and his journey “I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger… a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident” (204). So it ends where it began, in the middle of things and on the move. When the reader first joined the journey in the opening pages, the narrator and his attorney were in the middle of the desert between the freak sanctuary of Los Angeles and the uncertainty and vaguely threatening den of sin for Middle Class, Middle American tourists with the drugs and hallucinations just beginning to take hold. In the closing pages, the narrator has just exited from the Denver airport, still in a state of placelessness, still with drugs just about to take hold, and still on the move.

The cyclical pattern of the novel has manifested itself to the entire arc of the novel, from beginning to end. Nothing has changed. The narrator and the reader have come full circle, right back where they were from the beginning. However, that is not to say nothing has been gained or lost in the process. The reader has gained an uneasy, slightly sickening feeling, and simultaneously a giddy excitement and nervous laughter that everything worked out in the end,
or at least things did not spiral out of control and go up in flames. There is even some comfort that life goes on.

At this point, the reader exits the ride, but the image of the narrator continuing moving and spinning in constant cycles of pleasure and pain sits uneasily. It is a relief for the reader to exit the carousel, but for the narrator, there is no relief in sight. Ultimately, the position and experience of the narrator is nothing to either envy or emulate, and yet it is worthwhile to reflect on what he discovered in the threshold between the sovereign self and others as search for the deferred American Dream.
CONCLUSION

Like all picaresque stories, whether old Spanish or new American manifestations, *Fear and Loathing* centers around a first-person narrator who takes to travel and movement to try to recover and assert his sovereign identity. In doing so, he often positions himself against the place and the people. By attempting to reject elements of the world he finds distasteful, he hopes to have a remaining identity that he can claim as his own. In pursuit of this project, he lives out a deviant and borderline criminal lifestyle that is antagonistic to society. His belief in a sovereign self, though sometimes tenuously and cynically held, leads him to carve out temporary spaces for himself, which become his sovereign, masculine sanctuaries. Anyone who invades or threatens that space, especially women, poses a threat and must be ejected. The belief in and pursuit of a nonexistent sovereign self leads to the most troubling scenes of the novel, in which women and other weaker characters are abused, threatened, and violated.

However, the novel is also illuminating and refreshing in its unabashed portrayal of the weaknesses and limitations of the sovereign self, symbolized in the American Dream. The result is that even though the narrator pursues the Dream of a sovereign, rugged individual with the liberty and freedom to assert his unique identity, he also criticizes it and honestly reveals the limitations and dangers of pursuing it.

The challenging part of reading the novel this way is not excusing the abuses while appreciating the transgressive satire and insightful criticism. It is too easy for such a subtle analysis to collapse into its respective binaries on one hand or blur into a relativistic gray space that obscures more than it clarifies. In order to distinguish and clarify the argument for the purpose of avoiding blurring it into gray space, special attention needs to paid to specific ways in which the novel plays with and exposes both the appealing and disturbing sides of sovereignty.
and the American Dream. Reading the novel in such a way exposes the limitations of sovereignty and the ways in which, at its core, the American Dream as manifested in the novel is both present and absent, or more specifically its presence is its notable absence.

Considering the parallel between the novel and drugs is especially revealing on this point. When it comes to the curative and poisonous properties of drugs, one must consider two fronts: the drug’s properties and the body’s limitations. In terms of the drug, one must consider the potency, dosage, and duration of its effects. In terms of the body, one must consider its size and tolerance level. In other words, whether a drug exerts its beneficial or harmful properties depends on when, where, for whom, and how much. Similarly, whether Duke’s actions are liberating or arresting depends on how far he takes his actions and in which situations.

Extending the metaphor, Duke’s personality is potent and highly reactive, which means it is either is easier to understand in low doses or in reaction to large and dominant social systems. Conversely, it is at its messiest and hardest to understand when it taken to extremes in interaction with the little people of the novel, those who have little or nothing to do with the repressive hegemonies the narrator rails against. The hitchhiker, the maid, the runaway, and the waitress are mere victims of the same social conditions that Duke finds himself satirizing, and yet they are treated more like agents of the system. As a result, their individual humanity is erased in the narrator’s eyes, and, following such logic, they become justifiably abused. As a result, they are doubly victimized against the very spirit of freedom and liberty that the narrator purports to be a champion of.

It seems the reason Duke and Dr. Gonzo cannot distinguish between agents and victims of the system and so treat them all as potential threats has to do with the excessiveness and intensity of the protagonists’ way of life. As stated above, this can be conceptualized in terms of
dosage, drawing the parallel with drugs. Similarly, it can be understood as a function of the pace of their lifestyle. As noted throughout this thesis, the characters are constantly on the move, as is the novel itself. However, it is not enough to say they are constantly moving; rather, they are *speeding* throughout the text. Consequentially, the other characters become like the passing scenery in a speeding vehicle: blurred and indistinguishable. A sort of tunneling and telescoping of the landscape replaces obscures distinctions. Jean Baudrillard’s observation of the effect of the very same stretch of desert *Fear and Loathing* takes place in—the land in and around Death Valley and Las Vegas—explains the effect of the novel itself as well:

Death Valley and Las Vegas are inseparable; you have to accept everything at once, an unchanging timelessness and the wildest instanteity. There is a mysterious affinity between the sterility of wide open spaces and that of gambling, between the sterility of speed and that of expenditure. That is the originality of the deserts in the American West; it lies in that violent, electric juxtaposition. And the same applies to the whole country: you must accept everything at once, because it is this telescoping that gives the American way of life its illuminating, exhilarating side, just as, in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of the desert. If you approach this society with the nuances of moral, aesthetic, or critical judgment, you will miss its originality, which comes precisely from its defying judgment and pulling off a prodigious confusion of effects. [. . .] you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum. (67)

Although Baudrillard is contrasting the natural sublimity of Death Valley’s desert with the cultural abjectivity of Las Vegas in order to arrive at an analysis of America at large, he might as
well be analyzing the novel, which distills these very same elements in a potent 200 pages. Therefore, like Baudrillard’s America, the trouble with the novel and the reason it tends to repulse as much as it attracts is the way it blurs together everything and everyone in deference to the extreme self who is fervently speeding through the desert. It demands the reader accept the violence of intense contrasts and the polarizing vortex of things and events at once.


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