Mailer's American Dream

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The American dream has been in existence almost as long as America (as a political entity) has. From the Puritan's desire for the "City on the Hill" to Hunter S. Thompson's recent book Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream, Americans have been convinced that the individual can transcend earthly evil and decadence, and attain a state of perfection. The American dream is the visionary ideal that is represented in social form by utopian thinking. A personalized ideal would appear easier to attain than a social one because of its apparent relative simplicity, yet this is not the case. Personalization does not simplify the American dream.

There is a certain irony in any version of the dream, in that each individual attempting to attain it believes that others' definition of the dream was responsible for their failure, that this time it will be done, for usually one undertaking this adventure believes that he has divine support or guidance. A classic example of an individual who spent his life attempting to behave in accordance with his concept of the American dream is Ben Franklin. Franklin,
in his *Autobiography*, described how he sought to live a
life of rationality and moderation as an avenue to material
success and the political power necessary for the preserva-
tion of that success. The American dream is, for Franklin,
simply stated: "be prosperous." His morality, as expressed
in his Poor Richard proverbs, was a mixture of social con-
tract theory and spartanism, with material wealth as the
principle aim.

Whereas Franklin only required power in order to safe-
guard his economic interest, Mark Twain, in *A Connecticut
Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, interpreted the American
dream as the quest for power: "I would boss the whole country
inside of three months; for I judged I would have the start
of the best-educated man in the kingdom by a matter of thirteen
hundred years and upwards...." said Hank Morgan, Twain's
protagonist. ¹ The schemes that Morgan, "Sir Boss," conceived
involved the acquisition of material goods, but only in order
to increase his power. Morgan believed that "knowledge is
power." He set out to prove that education is, in modern
parlance, "the key to the future."
Twain's portrayal of the American dream differs from Franklin's in that Twain saw the quest for material wealth as being subordinate to the Americans' desire for power. That is a reversal of Franklin's view of power as the protector of wealth. The two views are similar though, in their emphasis on values that reflect social worth. The social is here distinguished from the personal in that the former term refers to the interaction of an individual with others; their latter term refers to interaction on the one-to-one, or in any case, private level. Man's personal values, such as the success of one's marriage, or one's feelings of personal worth based on internal criteria, are then not seen to be within the primary domain of the American dream by Franklin or Twain. Writers continued to portray the American dream as a striving for worth by externalized (social) means through the first half of the twentieth century, with cummings' *Him* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* being notable examples.

This trend was not uniform. *The Great Gatsby*, written before *Him* and *Death of a Salesman*, described a tycoon who was obsessed with the love for a woman whose voice was "full
of money. Though Gatsby was not as honest (Fitzgerald hints) as Ben Franklin, he was nevertheless a success in Franklin's manner. Gatsby had a list of "General Resolves" that he had tried to follow as a boy that would make Poor Richard beam with pride. Gatsby, later in life, did not exactly lead a life of moderation and prudence. Though he did not act rashly because of his frustrated love for Daisy, he was, as Nick, the narrator, noted, an unhappy man. Money is no replacement for love, Gatsby found.

With An American Dream, Norman Mailer continued the Fitzgeraldian view of the American dream. As Jay Gatsby measured his worth by Daisy's love, and not by the amount of money he had, so too does Stephen Rojack care little for his professional success:

I was now at a university in New York, a professor of existential psychology with the not inconsiderable thesis that magis, dread, and the perception of death were the roots of motivation; I was a personality on television and an author of sorts: I had had one popular book published, The Psychology of the Hangman, a psychological study of the styles of execution in different states and nations—death by guillotine, firing squad, by rope, by electric chair, by gas pellets—an interesting book. I had also— as I indicated—become the husband of an heiress, and
I had been most unsuccessful at that. In fact I had come to the end of a very long street. Call it an avenue. For I had come to decide I was finally a failure (15).

Rojack declared himself a failure on the basis of his marriage. His professional achievements would certainly make a Willy Loman jealous. Mailer is portraying, then, the American dream of 1965 as being the desire for experiences that reinforce one's sense of personal worth. Thus, marriage, or the fulfillment of one's goals developed from internal values becomes more important to the individual than one's job.

Curiously enough, Mailer is not the only observer of the 1960's to so interpret the American dream. As reported in the New York Times, the American Management Association conducted a survey of 2,800 businessmen and corporation executives entitled "The Changing Success Ethic." The survey found that eighty-three percent of those responding "don't define success in terms of business at all." The report went on to say that that group felt "that their basic life objectives are personal, private, and family centered."
The "Puritan Ethic" and "Personality Cult" of Dale Carnegie was called by the report "out of sync with the realities of human experience in the sixties and seventies." The article concluded: "The tensions in the American dream are obvious. What isn't so obvious is how they might be resolved."

To some extent, An American Dream is an illustration of one way of resolving the tension in the dream. On another level, it is an ironic reinterpretation of the traditional American dream. The title suggests that the reader will find the American dream to be the main subject of the novel. When one learns that the book is about a man on a murderous and sexual escapade, another irony is perceived. This irony involves the "American nightmare," which is the dark, demoniac counterpart of the American dream. The American nightmare is the triumph of the "dark" figure, as portrayed by Hawthorne, who hinted, in "Roger Malvin's Burial" that the wilderness that Americans seek to mold is a "tangled and gloomy forest" which brings out man's evil.

The American dream and the American nightmare both derive from America's enormity. The former revels in that knowledge,
while the latter becomes more terrible for it. To give an example along the lines of Hawthorne's, the American dream was embodied by the Puritans who viewed their mission in New England as an "errand into the wilderness," as Perry Miller termed it. Miller saw the nightmare's potential when he wondered what the Puritans thought "if the rest of the world, or at least of Protestantism, looked elsewhere... or simply got distracted and forgot about New England"?7 (Miller said that the "errand into New England collapsed. There was nobody left at headquarters to whom reports could be sent.)8 To the Puritans, the American nightmare was their fear that the forest would become large and gloomy, and entrap them. More simply, it was of fear of losing their divine guidance, which would result in a loss of purpose for their mission.

An American Dream then, is written in a context of irony and paradox. Ironic in that the traditional concept of the dream is inverted into the Fitzgeraldian tragic mode, where the materially successful protagonist is emotionally wanting. Ironic also in that the protagonist, in either mode of the dream, believes his dream to be attainable.
The context is paradoxical in that the American dream and American nightmare are at times difficult to identify, as they are reactions to the same phenomenon. This paradox has one wondering if it is to God's word or the Devil's that the protagonist is subject.

It is euphemistic to say that Norman Mailer is flamboyant. There is no writer in the public eye as much as Mailer. Since 1948, when _The Naked and the Dead_ was published, Mailer has done such things as publicly support Henry Wallace for President, co-found the _Village Voice_, write a column for _Esquire_ (where _An American Dream_ was originally published, serially, as Dickens had done, writing one chapter each month, after the preceding one appeared), get arrested for stabbing his second wife, and for public drunkenness in Provincetown, make three films, run for mayor of New York, march on the Pentagon and write a National Book Award/Pulitzer Prize winning book about it, engage in debates with feminists, appear on television talk-shows, and all the while publish more than fifteen books. He has written five
novels, several volumes of essays, a volume of poetry, filmscripts, and several works of reportage. Accordingly, Mailer has been called a super-journalist, social critic, novelist, woman-hater, "romantic-egoist," and a variety of other printable and unprintable names. Mailer most usually terms himself a novelist, and claims to be a "Left Conservative" politically. While it is not my aim to determine which of these labels is correct, if any, I do wish to demonstrate that Mailer is an eclectic individual who is not afraid of experimentation either in his personal life or in his literature.

The Naked and the Dead received substantial critical acclaim, as well as popular success. None of Mailer's other books would receive as widespread praise. By the 1960's, many critics had become openly hostile to Mailer, accusing him of writing "the stuff of comic books," or "a lot of voodoo about cancer." Joan Didion wrote in 1965, in the National Review, "if it had always been easy to laugh at Mailer, it was never easier than when he announced, clearly in trouble, running scared, that he had dared himself to
write a novel in installments for Esquire." Implicit in
the disdain for the commercial is the belief that a book
that is financially successful (such as The Armies of the
Night, or Of a Fire on the Moon, both of which Mailer has
written since An American Dream) could not also have artistic
merit. Suffice it to say that lucrativeness has not been
conclusively proven to be mutually exclusive with quality.

I aim, in this paper, to demonstrate that An American
Dream is a book of considerable quality by analyzing the
novel's thematic motifs. I believe that the novel is an
unified work because its symbol system, which is not very
complicated, serves the several thematic motifs, which,
in turn, are interrelated. Specifically, I will discuss
the religious, psychological, and social themes in An
American Dream, and the roles that Rojack, the protagonist,
plays in each of them.

The plot of An American Dream is rudimentary. Stephen
Rojack, war hero, ex-congressman, college professor, kills
his wife, Deborah, has sex with her maid, talks with the
police, meets a nightclub singer, Cherry, has an affair with
her, fights a black entertainer, Shago Martin, talks with his father-in-law, Kelly, then flees for Las Vegas. Mailer said in an interview, "my plots are always rudimentary. Whatever I've accomplished certainly does not depend on my virtuosity with plot. What happens is that my characters engage in an action, and out of that action little bits of plot sometimes adhere to the narrative." Mailer's characters do "engage in actions," which at times seem fantastic. The cumulative effect, however, of the frequently fantastic machinations in the action is different than the effect of any individual event.

This effect is due to the fact that in certain ways, An American Dream conforms to the conventions of the romance. The reader, realizing that since from Rojack's point of view, the characters are stylized figures, and not social types, as they appear to the reader, certain allowances can be made in demanding verisimilitude from the book. The disparate views Rojack and the reader have of the characters allows for a plot that is in the mode of the romance, and thus be dream-like, while at the same time, comment upon
contemporary society, for the book is replete with such stereotypical social types as the billionaire tycoon, night-club singer, and "good cop." Thus, An American Dream has certain conventions of the novel as well.

An example of how a character is treated as both a stylized figure and as a social type can be seen in Rojack's wife, Deborah. "I seduced a girl who would have been bored with a diamond as big as the Ritz"(9) said Rojack in the opening paragraph of the book. It is a picture of an heiress if ever there was one. Yet this daughter of one of the world's richest men was also described as having a hand "soft now as a jellyfish, and almost as repugnant,"(31) and "a stench of sweet rot"(30). Rojack sees Deborah as more than an heiress; he views her to be a creature in a dream-world of strange sensations. His actions toward her accordingly take on a trance-like character, culmination in his murder of her, where she was "like a gladiator admitting defeat"(35) as he had hallucination after hallucination, as her throat went "crack"(36).

Michael Wood has another explanation of why the reader
I can believe in the novel's plausibility:

Irresponsible speculation is Mailer's profession, the very gift. The thing is to make the speculation stick imaginatively, not scale it down to something safe. Much of Mailer's best writing rests on his ability to convert personal obsessions or superstitions or metaphors for the things that matter to us all. Thus we learn, in *An American Dream*, that New York City is run by a "buried maniac," who sets up all the city's awkward, improbable plots and coincidences. 14

Wood's explanation also links the imaginary with the real. What Wood is saying is that many real-life situations, by themselves, seem grotesque. Mailer has the ability to juxtapose such situations in such a way as to justify their reality.

Part of the difficulty in such an explanation, and with all criticism of Mailer, is that of the critic being able to sufficiently distance himself from the material in order to be understood by one less involved in the material than himself. Because of the unusual nature of much of Mailer's writing (it's overintellectualized pseudomysticism based on everyday symbols), it is necessary to "suspend disbelief" when reading it, in order first to understand intuitively
what Mailer is saying, and then to be able to evaluate, in a rational manner, the portent of the passage read. Once this is done, however, the critic is faced with the task of communicating this understanding to others without sounding like a "believer," but rather like an explainer and evaluator of Mailer's work.

One of the greatest problems with Mailer is how serious he should be taken. To me, Mailer is frequently a self-conscious quipster who still isn't comfortable with the fact that he is a public figure.

Being well known at twenty-five created a chain of legend for everything I did. If I left a party early, it wasn't because I might have been sleepy; it was because I had put down the party. This immediately created champions for me: "That Mailer's too much- put down the hostess when he left the party." Others would say, "Dreadful- no manners; a barbarian." People expected me to grab the hostess of a party, sound her, yank her, pump her, and if I didn't like her, throw her out the window, then turn to my host, say "up your buns, guns," and walk over to sock the nearest guy in the eye. So when I went into a place and didn't behave like that, the other guests would say: "Why, he has such nice manners." Every little thing I did
was exaggerated. Lo! There was a feedback that had little to do with me. It was as if— if you will— every one of my actions was tuned to an amplifier. 15

While Mailer may have had the naïveté he ascribes to himself in 1948, he certainly did not have it in 1967, when he made the above statement. His reaction to his popularity was to perpetrate a series of put-ons. This was not extended to his fiction, but essays like "The Political Economy of Time" rival Wilhelm Reich's The Mass Psychology of Fascism for arguments that are circular and inane. Reich, however, was not a novelist. He did not have the same license as Mailer has. So while on the surface, Mailer's intellectual posturings seem banal, he is experimenting with his style of metaphor, and getting into territory whose terrain is too difficult to navigate. He becomes lost, but has a grand time of it. That is where the humor enters— to save him from his self-created intellectual quagmire. For example:

I don't think you have a mystical experience on chemicals without taking the risk of exploiting something in the creation. If you haven't paid the real wages of love or courage or abstention or discipline or sacrifice or wit in the eye of danger, then taking a psychedelic
drug is living the life of the parasite; it's drawing on sweets you have not earned. Please do not say, by the way, that LBJ is the biggest cornball in America; with the above, I have just presented my credentials.16

The above passage illustrates the essence of Mailer's metaphors. They do not so much describe what Mailer thinks exists, but rather what he thinks should exist. When the disparity between the two becomes too great, humor serves as an appeasement to reason.

While the put-on is not in Mailer's fiction on a grand scale, there are instances of humor which serve a similar purpose. In An American Dream, for example, when Rojack's hallucinations seem almost comical, Mailer pushes them to the absurd, and thus breaks that tension:

I was floating on a zephyr of drunkedness, a magic riser. My brain had developed into a small manufactory of psychic particles, pellets, rockets the length of a pin, planets the size of of your eye's pupil when the iris closed down. I had even some artillery, a battery of bombs smaller than seeds of caviar but ready to be shot across the room.

Exhibit for some future court: The prize-fighter said "Oil it" once again to Cherry, and
I fired a battery of guns at him. His laughter stopped in the middle; he scowled as if four very bad eggs had been crushed on his head. His nostrils screwed down to the turn of disgust I expected would be in the smell. He looked about. He, in his turn, calculated, (he was no stranger to such attacks) located me as the probable source, and proceeded to kick an imaginary foot deep into my crotch. My shield went down to block it. Blocked! "Your foot hurts," said my mind to him, and he looked depressed. After a while he started to rub the toe of that shoe against his calf (95).

As well as serving as a comic diversion, and as a tension reliever, this passage also makes light of Rojacks large ego. Not only does he have a larger and more powerful arsenal of "psychic particles," but Rojacks is more clever with his use of them. Furthermore, when Romeo, the prize-fighter, kicked at Rojacks with an imaginary foot, the latter of course deftly blocked it. Almost always, Mailers humor is a self-parody. It reminds the reader to interpret Mailers other statements more figuratively than literally.

Throughout The Presidential Papers, Mailer wrote of technology (he was an aeronautical engineering major while at Harvard),
God, existentialism, sex, and totalitarianism. He arranged these and other ideas in coupled opposites: God and the Devil (God is "the lord of inspiration," and the Devil, "a monumental bureaucrat of repetition") sex and technology (with sex representing man's animalistic component, and the one endowed with free will; technology standing for the mechanical and determined), and existentialism and totalitarianism (the former term refers to an act whose "end is unknown," while the latter refers to the cult of sameness that Mailer calls the "plague" or "cancer." "The essence of totalitarianism is that it beheads. It beheads individuality, variety, dissent, extreme possibility, romantic faith, it blinds vision, deadens instinct, it obliterates the past.... it obliterates distinctions." For Mailer, the universe has a dialectical structure of opposing forces, to which man is subject. The dialectical pairs or interrelated for Mailer. It would be fruitless to attempt to fully discuss Mailer's concept of technology without mentioning his views on sex, religion, or politics. These topics are inextricably
entwined for Mailer. He cannot make mention of one dialectical pair without referring to the other pairs. (There is a list, in fact, in Advertisements for Myself, that delineates Mailer's dialectic called "The Hip and the Square." While Mailer has abandoned the use of the Hipster as a symbol, largely because it has vanished as a social type, the list, with such pairings as "free will/determinism," "instinct/logic," and "the body/the mind" offers a more succinct and explicit explanation of Mailer's world-view than is found elsewhere.)

Mailer's dialectical vision is the ideological basis for the thematic motif of An American Dream. Recurring serpent imagery (9, 38, 174, 219, 223, and 225) as well as discussions of the battle between God and the Devil, cue one into the presence of a religious motif in the novel. Similarly, repeated references to insanity (17, 27, 86, 99, 103, 107, 127, 150, 175, 197, 235, 243, and 249) and notations of hallucination lead one to see a psychological motif. Little convincing is needed to have one believe that there is a social motif in An American Dream, as the novel is set in contemporary New York, with characters who are stereotypical social types, as previously noted.
The serpent is a well known and often used symbol for Satan. It is not consistently tied to any one character, though. The snake is in Rojack's heart (9), in Deborah's (38), and is even on the Kelly family's coat of arms (223). If the snake is seen as a measure of individual sinfulness, instead of as a symbol for the devil in each individual, things become less confusing. Evil is in all of us, says Mailer. But what of the good?

Rojack asked himself, after Deborah's murder, "'Am I now good? Am I evil forever?'-it seemed an indispensable question to ask..."(42). Rojack was unsure of his own goodness. Kelly was to explain it to him: "God and the Devil are very attentive to people at the summit. I don't know if they stir too much in the average man's daily stew, no great sport for spooks, I would suppose, in a ranch house, but do you expect God or the Devil left Lenin or Hitler or Churchill alone? No. They bid for favors and exact revenge. That's why men with power sometimes act so silly"(230). Rojack then, on the summit, because of his marriage into
the Kelly family, and because of the notoriety he has attained in his own right, is being watched, and having favors exacted by God and the Devil. Rojack said it himself: "Yes, I had come to believe in spirits and demons, in devils, warlocks, omens, wizards and fiends, in incubi and succubi..."(40). Indeed, Kelly pointed out to Rojack that the latter had said on television "that God's engaged in a war with the Devil, and God may lose"(221).

This raging battle between divines does not imply subjugation for man, whatever the outcome. God, for Mailer, is "the creator of nature." Evil then becomes "a record of the Devil's victories over God."21 Evil can be identified as a transgression of nature, such as pollution, paved highways, and many products of technology. If man is "free" in his natural, or God-given state, an erosion of nature can cause the erosion of man's freedom, as Mailer's argument follows.

If God has a "mysterious goal" for his "conception of Being,"22 Rojack has a very specific one. He was seeking
the "jeweled city." As he was strangling his wife, he thought, "I had the mental image I was pushing with my shoulder against an enormous door which would give inch by inch to the effort....But I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk..."(35). The "jeweled city" is an example of apocalyptic imagery, and symbolizes man's desire for the complete control of the inorganic world. It is unclear, however, whether or not Rojack ever enters the city in the last paragraph of the novel. "I was not good enough to climb up [on the spires]" said Rojack (251), yet he was "safe in the city"(252). It is even ambiguous as to whether Las Vegas is the city, or if it is out in the desert in some elusive place. If Rojack were to unambiguously enter the city, then the battle of God and the Devil would be over so far as he is concerned, as the city of jewels is heaven. Mailer would rather have Rojack journey to the primal jungles of Yucatan, leaving the reader to wonder how Rojack resolves his problems.
While Rojack was concerned with the divine battle, Deborah saw the gods in a different light. "Evil has power" she said (40); she was therefore attracted to it. So too was Rojack attracted to Deborah. "Marriage to her was the armature of my ego; remove the armature and I might topple like clay....I loved her the way a drum majorette loved the power of the band for the swell it gave to each strut" (23). Rojack wanted power, on one level, so that he might never again find himself in a situation like the one on a hill in Italy, where "the clean presence of it, the grace" left him in the instant he hesitated (13). It is as if grace could be, in Rojack's view, ensured through volition alone.

Another view of the power lust is that it is in the American character to want power, for power is viewed as a currency of love, as seen in the drum majorette quotation. The desire for power is even carried into the American institutionalization of religion, where is a currency of politics. As Rojack began his political career, he was introduced to "the Cardinal" by Mrs. Roosevelt. The Cardinal,
with his "one question" is portrayed as a power broker. If anyone had power in New York, other than billionaires, implies Mailer, it is the Catholic diocese, "Protestant gentry," and "Jewish gentry" (14). Grace, however, is given by God to individuals ready to receive it, which is not the same as seeking it.23

Deborah told Rojack that he lacked grace (she of course claimed to have it) (37). There is no indication though, that she had any at all. Only after Rojack murdered Deborah, and thus divorced himself from her values, did he experience grace, with no effort exerted on his part, of course (41). Grace favors the passive element in people who would receive it.

Mailer has fancied himself to be a psychologist of sorts since at least 1957, when he wrote "The White Negro" in Dissent. It is not surprising then, to find a psychological motif in An American Dream. Rojack is himself a professor of "existential psychology," and seemed keenly aware of his own homicidal and suicidal tendencies. Understanding his dilemma was no help in resolving it. Rojack felt as though
his actions were motivated by strong external forces, represented by the voices he heard from the moon (19 ff.), or from his brain (20 ff.), or by a "field of force"(44). For almost every action, Rojack is faced with two choices: to stay or to leave, to jump or not to, to kill or not to. Just as Rojack was balanced on the parapet (16, 210 241), so was his mind balanced on a fine edge, ready to totter toward either side with the slightest gust of wind. "My will, divided against itself, quivered from the effort [of putting one foot forward on Kelly's parapet]"(211).

In "The Hip and the Square," "psychopathic" was paired with "schizophrenic" on the Hip/Square list, respectively. Mailer relied heavily, in "The White Negro," upon Robert Lindner, author of Rebel Without a Cause, for a definition of the psychopath. According to Lindner:

the psychopath is a rebel without a cause, an agitator without a slogan, a revolutionary without a program: in other words, his rebelliousness is aimed to achieve goals satisfactory to himself alone; he is incapable of exertion for the sake of others. All his efforts, hidden under no
matter what guise, represent investments designed
to satisfy his immediate wishes and desires....
The psychopath, like the child, cannot delay the
pleasures of gratification; and this trait is
one of his underlying universal characteristics.
He cannot wait upon erotic gratification which
convention demands should be preceded by the chase
before the kill: he must rape. He cannot wait
upon the development of prestige in society: his
egoistic ambitions lead him to leap into headlines
by daring performances. Like a red thread the
predominance of this mechanism for immediate
satisfaction runs through the history of every
psychopath. It explains not only his behavior
but also the violent nature of his acts.25

The psychopath then, externalizes his problem while
the psychotic internalizes his. The psychopath "explodes,"
the psychotic withdraws. That is why, as Lindner mentions,
that "no psychopath ever commits suicide."26 Mailer elaborated
upon Lindner and wrote:

Now, for reasons which may be more curious
than the similarity of the words, even many
people with a psychoanalytic orientation often
confuse the psychopath with the psychotic. Yet
the terms are polar. The psychotic is legally
insane, the psychopath is not; the psychotic
is almost always incapable of discharging in
physical acts the rage of his frustration, while
the psychopath at his extreme is virtually as incapable of restraining his violence. The psychotic lives in so misty a world that what is happening at each moment of his life is not very real to him whereas the psychopath seldom knows any reality greater than the face, the voice, the being of the particular people among whom he may find himself at any moment.27

Mailer's psychological dialectic then is the psychopathic and the murderous versus the psychotic and suicidal. Rojack exhibits certain characteristics of the psychopath: violence, immediate sexual gratification, and observation of details. He also seems to exhibit psychotic qualities at other times, as when he has "the itch to jump" (16).

The question of the parapet, to jump or not to jump, is therefore implicitly also asking, "murder then, if you don't jump?" For Rojack is a driven man. He has to do something extreme. His course of action narrows to murder or suicide. Only by experiencing one will he be able to avoid the other, and subsequently find a middle road. As with the God-Devil dipole, Rojack will not find a resolution within the timespan the novel allows.

The murder-suicide dialectic is a choice among non-choices
in actuality. Each act would have Rojack listen to a different voice. The overriding issue is that of free will and determinism. Throughout the novel, Rojack is a man compelled. He felt compelled to go to Harlem to ensure a blessing for Cherry (190). He had to walk "all three sides" (232) of Kelly's parapet twice, "the second [time] was for Cherry." (244).

In the taxi on the way to Kelly's, Rojack hears two voices, one bidding him to Harlem, the other to Kelly's (191). "Which was true?" asks Rojack (191). Caught in indecision, he sits back and allows the cab to bypass Harlem, and thus bring him closer to the Waldorf. "Still it would have been better to choose!" reproved the voice. (191). Rojack said that he did not choose because he could not; he had "the knowledge that [if you were] a killer [and] attracted the attention of the gods, then your mind was not your own..." (192). That is, a transgression of one of society's laws limits one's mobility in that society. Social conventions therefore constrain the options a murderer has open to him.

So too, in An American Dream is the social context a
predominating factor. Granted, Rojack could live in any time period, in any city, for many effects of the novel to still work. Mailer intimates this as Rojack enters the Waldorf (194). The juxtaposition of the nineteenth-century clock with the plasticine (though genuine) tulips lends an air of timelessness to the action. Yet *An American Dream* does take place in New York City in the early 1960's. (The first of eight installments of the novel appeared January, 1964.) The numerous references to familiar people and places continually reinforces that fact.

Ordinarily, a work of prose fiction conveys its social commentary to the reader by conforming to certain conventions of the novel. That is, characters would be social types, and the protagonist's interaction with them would illustrate the author's views on relevant matters concerning society. To an extent, Mailer has done this. I am more interested in how Mailer comments upon society through conventions of the romance.

This may seem paradoxical. It is not so confusing if Mailer's other work is taken into account. From *Cannibals*
and Christians and The Presidential Papers, it can be seen that Mailer perceives totalitarianism to be the greatest threat to contemporary society. Totalitarianism, alternately referred to as the plague or cancer metaphorically, or fascism politically, can be seen in a variety of forms:

There are liberals who are totalitarian, and conservatives, and radicals, fanatics, hordes of the well-adjusted. Totalitarianism has come to America with no concentration camps and no need for them, no political parties, no, totalitarianism has slipped into the body-cells and psyche of each of us. It has been transported, modified, codified, and inserted into each of us by way of the popular arts, the social crafts, political crafts, and the corporate techniques. It sits in the image of the commercials on television which use phallic and vaginal symbols to sell products which are otherwise useless for sex... it resides in the taste of frozen food... the mechanical action in every household appliance which breaks too soon, it vibrates in the sound of an air conditioner or the flicker of fluorescent lighting.²⁸

Technology, be it the tools or products of it, is a constant reminder to Mailer of totalitarianism, as it is so easily made totalitarian. A machine is ideal for totalitarianism as it "obliterates distinctions,"²⁸ or has the capability
to, if it is made to produce a vast quantity of identical items. Technology, in Mailer's view, has employed that capability.

Aside from the implied uniformity in the technological, there is also the feature of predictability characteristic of it. Opposed to the determined outcome that technology offers, is the unknown outcome of the existential. The organic is more existential, in Mailer's terms, than the inorganic. The animal therefore is the polar opposite of the technological in Mailer's scheme. "A human being totally determined is a machine" wrote Mailer five years after the publication of An American Dream.  

In An American Dream, symbols of the technological, or mechanistic aspect of man are counterposed with symbols of man's animal nature. Rojack is in a struggle between the two forces. Rojack smelled almost everybody he encountered, as would an animal. It has previously been shown how Rojack acted when forces were exerted upon him, yet his emotions were sometimes tainted with the images of technology: "An anxiety went off in me like the quiver of electricity
when there is a short in the line" (56).

So through symbolism which is accessible mainly through his other work, Mailer uses Rojack as an instrument of social forces, thus representing the plight of modern man and of society. The twist is, the protagonist is not in a socially mimetic situation, but rather in a more original one of the author's own making. There is nevertheless social commentary of the more traditional genre in An American Dream.

Through his description of Barney Oswald Kelly, Mailer is offering his theory of the tycoon. There is an underlying conspiracy theme in the novel, never explicitly articulated. There seems to be a connection, through Kelly, between the CIA and the Mafia. "'Got the CIA?' [Kelly] put a finger to his lips at the directness of the remark. 'Threads!' " (222).

Just as Mailer's view of CIA plots is dim, so is his presentation of conspiracies sketchy in the novel. It is effective in communicating the intrigue Mailer feels when discussing such theories. Mailer is not so nebulous though,
in his description of social phenomenon that he perceives more clearly.

His portrayal of ethnic prejudice, for example, is quite explicit. In this case, it is plain that Mailer is not endorsing that ancient institution. Before Rojack fights Shago Martin, Shago makes Rojack quite conscious that he is white and that Shago is black. Thus, the fight is overshadowed with white guilt, even though Shago had a knife. (It is interesting to note though, in Shago's defense, that Rojack attacked from the rear. (181).)

Rojack's escape from New York in the final chapter of the novel is not in itself a final resolution for him. It does, however, alleviate the pressures that urban life had sustained against him. In the jungle of Yucatán, far away is the place that believes in the New York Times. Not to be seen are the cars, concrete buildings, bars and other familiar signs of what Americans call civilization. Urban living must have been a burden to Rojack. He must not have been comfortable in his Sutton Place apartment if he had to flee to the jungle. Surely London or Los Angeles
would have been as anonymous. He had to escape society, in short. It may be that society not only delineates one's options for behavior under specified circumstances, but that society totally determines, so far as some are concerned, one's entire behavior.

Rojack could not function in society. In a way, he was a psychopath. He may have found salvation in the jungle, in relative solitude. To that extent, in a social analysis, the protagonist triumphed, for he demonstrated his desire to shun society and its trappings. Rojack's flight to Yucatan represented a triumph of the animalistic. There is no indication that it will be a permanent arrangement.

It is significant that there is a resolution, or sorts, within one motif in *An American Dream*. The fact that it is the social motif that has the most complete resolution within the timespan of the novel indicates that Mailer is more confident in his analysis of society, than in his analysis of man's psyche or spirit. It is only in the social motif that any solutions were even suggested. In the other motifs, only the problems were posed. I think
Mailer's confidence is well placed, if it is to be placed anywhere.

I hope these pages have shown how An American Dream is a complex, unified work, that treats the traditional concern of the American dream in a new and interesting fashion. Mailer, using a realistic setting, and elements of the novel and romance, explored the spiritual, psychological, and social nature of the contemporary American, personified by Stephen Rojack. Rojack, a pawn in the struggle of great forces, opposing absolutes, symbolized man's and society's plight. Mailer's vision is a dialectical one, but it is not necessarily a long-term one. An American Dream, when placed alongside Mailer's other work, helps delineate the magnitude of his vision at the time of the writing. Where Mailer has matured in his thinking since 1965 is the topic for another paper, though the technique herein employed—looking to earlier works for clarification of subjects that are vague in the work being considered (and reinterpreting older material in light of recent writing, which was not done in this paper)—would presumably also be useful. An
American Dream, with its integrated thematic motifs and paradoxical protagonist, should be remembered as one of Norman Mailer's most ambitious, if not successful novels, or for that matter, works of prose.
Notes:


2. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, (New York: Scribner's, 1925), p. 120.


(Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 151-152.


23.Mailer here is influenced by Buber who wrote, "The
   You encounters me by grace- it cannot happen by
   seeking." Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter


25. Robert M. Lindner, Rebel Without a Cause, (New York:


27. Advertisements for Myself, p. 317.


29. Norman Mailer, Of a Fire on the Moon, (rpt. New York:

30. "'Unfortunately,' said Physics, 'there is no acceptable
   science of smell.'" Of a Fire on the Moon, p. 162.

31. See An American Dream, p. 40.
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