

**A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF NORMAL MAILER'S
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG, A NONFICTION
NOVEL ABOUT THE DESTITUTE**

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Norman Mailer's nonfiction novel **The Executioner's Song** deals with murder. It is the story of Gary Gilmore who robbed two men and killed them without hesitation. The book is proof of Mailer's dexterity in making nonfiction narratives. In fact, Mailer won his second Pulitzer prize in 1980 with his 1050-page work of art **The Executioner's Song**¹. As in all nonfiction novels, Mailer unites fact and fiction in **The Executioner's Song**. He relies heavily on documents and uses novelistic techniques to write about characters who seem to be fictional.

Mailer divides the book into two parts about the same length and entitles them as "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices." The narrative method is the same in both. The characters, Gilmore and those who were somehow related to him, are presented in brief scenes. The extra spacing between the short paragraphs facilitates the shift from one character to another. It is as if the character who makes an effort to recall the events, were telling his story to an interviewer or into a tape recorder. In general the language used is flat but tuned to the styles and rhythms of the characters.

The first book, "Western Voices" concentrates on Gary Gilmore's life during the nine-month nine-day period starting with his parole from the prison in Marion, Illinois and his re-entrance to prison for the last time in Utah.

Gary Gilmore is tall, thin and extremely provincial. He has spent most of his life in reform schools or various prisons. He is the epitome of the destitute, a continuous loser. His mother says, Gary "was in prison so long, he didn't know how to work for a living or pay a bill. All the while he should have been learning, he was locked up" (312). That is why Gary constantly fears not being able to "make those years up" (42). He is awkward when out of prison; he wears mismatched clothes; he

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drinks excessively, commits crimes, cannot make friends and is poor with women.

"At night, Bessie (his mother) would ask him, 'Where are you going?' 'Out to find trouble,' Gary would reply, 'find some trouble' (468). Gary is not only a troublemaker but also a trouble seeker. He says to his interviewer:

I came out looking for trouble... I had a tough-guy complex, that sort of smart aleck juvenile-delinquent attitude... Nobody could tell me anything. I had a ducktail haircut, I smoked, drank, shot heroin, smoked weed, took speed, got into fights, chased and caught pretty little broads... I stole and robbed and gambled... (797)

When he is asked, "What did you want to make of your life?" he says "I wanted to be a mobster" (797).

Gary seemed to have an uncontrollable urge to commit crime. They were on a job to insulate a house and Gary turns to the eighteen year old man also named Gary:

"Let's steal the truck."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's come back tonight and steal it. Then we'll paint it and sell it" (127).

When he goes out with his friend Rikki in Provo and they cannot find any girls, Gary says, "I've had enough! Why don't we just grab a couple bitches and rape them" (56). Upon Rikki's refusal, Gary's next suggestion is to "rob a bank" (57).

Gary is dishonest most of the time as is seen when he plays poker. He can become extremely violent at times. This is revealed in his prison stories to which people listen in awe:

"In prison I killed a guy," said Gary. "He was black and big and I stabbed him 57 times. Then I propped him up on his baseball cap on his head, and stuck a cigarette in his mouth" (127).

Yet can Gilmore be the only one to be blamed for what he is?

When Gilmore was three, and his brother four, his father and mother stopped to have dinner in a restaurant in

Santa Barbara. Then his father said he had to get some change. He'd be right back. He didn't come back for three months. His mother was alone with no money and two little boys. So she had started hitchhiking to Provo (404).

In the Catholic school in Portland,

"Sisters used to go insane with frustration trying to make me conform. I got beat by nuns more than once. It wasn't like when they disciplined other children there. My father finally took me out of the school" (834).

Gary's confession to the prison Chaplain while waiting for his execution also shows that a person who has undergone such experiences cannot be expected to be normal. During the time he was in a reform school "a couple of boys held him and raped him. He hated it but as he got older he participated in the same game on the other side" (484).

The first section of **The Executioner's Song** deals with characters who are mainly family members, his girlfriend Nicole Baker and Gary's two victims. Gilmore is released from a federal penitentiary to his cousin in Provo, Utah and a month later moves out and starts working on a full-time job. He soon meets Nicole Baker whose life is just as dark as his. Nicole is nineteen, twice divorced with two children and has been in and out of mental hospitals. She blames her father's close friend Uncle Lee for her troubles. Uncle Lee abused her sexually when she was a child.

Gary and Nicole fall in love immediately. He has her name tattooed on his arm while she has his on her ankle. Gary moves in with Nicole and after a short rather peaceful period, he begins to steal and resumes his former life filled with crimes. However, their love affair is a destructive one and she breaks off with him after nine months. Angry and frustrated at the loss of his girlfriend, Gilmore's reaction is to kill Nicole, but being drunk and under the effect of drugs, he ends up killing a gas station attendant and a motel manager. Book one ends with Gilmore's capture.

Book two, "Eastern Voices" portrays Gary Gilmore in prison, his execution and the later developments in the lives of Nicole and his mother. The attention shifts to the lawyers and media types who swarm into the story.

Larry Schiller appears on the scene and becomes an important

character in this section. Schiller plays a major role in the creation of the book for he acquires the rights to Gilmore's life and tape records the numerous conversations between him and Gilmore. Schiller cunningly manipulates the media to arouse interest in the case and continues to work with Gary fearing his execution before completing the whole story. His final appearance in the book is when he accompanies Nicole to California for more interviews.

Following his trial, Gilmore is sentenced to death for first degree murder. Interestingly enough, Gilmore defends Capital Punishment insisting on his right to die and refuses to appeal his conviction. An unwanted stay of execution granted by the governor of Utah makes him attempt suicide. A strong believer in reincarnation and Karma, Gary even convinces Nicole to commit suicide with him so that they can be together again in another life. When their attempts fail Gary goes on a hunger strike. He fears a life-term imprisonment because it will only delay his reincarnation. Therefore, he insists on the death penalty and becomes his own executioner.

No one had been executed in the United States for ten years and Gary faces the firing squad at the Utah State prison on January 17, 1977. His execution in the prison cannery is gruesome and far from being civilized. Gary's last wish is to have his ashes scattered over Spanish Fork, Utah. The two lawyers Moody and Stanger are given this task. However, it is not the dignified burial Gary has requested:

They had this cardboard container the size of a shoebox, and once they were in the air, Stanger opened it. Gary's ashes had been put into a plastic bag of the sort you sell bread in, a cellophane bag with the printing from the bread company clearly on it. That freaked Schiller out. Here, Stanger was holding this bag up next to the window, and it had colored printing all over it, not festive, but cheap, a 59-cent loaf of bread. Schiller imagined that the ashes would be black and somber and kind of dignified, they were gray and white and had bits of bone in them, a seedy, used-up color (1022).

Some are fortunate and some are not. Gary Gilmore was born a loser. His background, environment, and he himself contributed to what he was- the destitute.

The nonfiction novel provides an ideal form for relating the life stories of characters like Gary Gilmore. Mailer stated that **The**

Executioner's Song "does its best to be a factional account" and that it is a "true life novel" (Mailer 1051).² Even though Mailer preferred to call his work a novel, in an afterword he revealed the characteristics of the nonfiction novel when he stated how the work came into being:

The Executioner's Song is directly based on interviews, documents, records of court proceedings, and other original material came from a number of trips to Utah and Oregon. More than one hundred people were interviewed face to face, plus a good number talked by telephone. The total, before count was lost, came to something like three hundred separate sessions, and they range in length from fifteen minutes to four hours... It is safe to say that the collected transcript of every last recorded bit of talk would approach fifteen thousand pages (1051).

Unlike his earlier nonfiction books, more specifically, **The Armies of the Night**, in which Mailer himself becomes the protagonist, the author keeps himself out of **The Executioner's Song**. His collaboration with Lawrence Schiller is mentioned but it is not included in the narrative. Although by not intruding and by not revealing his role as behind-the-scenes arranger Mailer tries to give the impression of presenting the material with little manipulation and without any comment, it is obvious that there is more selection and shaping in the work than he intended to reveal. It is interesting to note that Mailer speaks about the factual accuracy of his book in a manner that casts doubt to its factuality. He insisted that his work should be understood simply as a novel and thus, on the best-seller lists it was placed in the category of fiction.

According to Ronald Weber, the book falls into the category of what Masud Zavarzadeh calls "notational nonfiction novel" which simply transcribes experience (Weber 170).³ Zavarzadeh, an expert on the nonfiction form, describes the notational nonfiction novel as:

The narrative of total transparency. With the aid of sophisticated technological devices, its narrative stance acts out of the contemporary mistrust of totalizing fiction... the "author" of this kind of narrative rarely participates in the actual events himself, but the content of his book... consists of the tested experiences of its narrators, and the narrative axis of the book revolves around their testifying voices (Zavarzadeh 177).

Again in **The Mythopeic Reality**, Zavarzadeh says: "Instead of a fictive world the notational nonfiction novel depicts a stubborn phenomenal circle of experience which, when closely examined, proves baffling and mysterious" (181). The protagonist Gary Gilmore's actions as well as crimes are incomprehensible and illogical. It is difficult to believe that characters like Gilmore, Nichole and others in the book could exist in the real world and are not invented characters. The traditional boundaries between the real and the fictitious are threatened. Reality seems to be more unrealistic for the unthinkable has come true. Confronted with such characters and events, the reader is baffled.

What distinguishes **The Executioner's Song** from other nonfiction novels is that it does not concentrate solely on the Gilmore case that drew a lot of attention, but reveals what cannot be found in other nonfiction novels, that is, the payoffs for exclusive rights or legal releases. It shows the great struggle that goes behind the scene to get Gilmore's story.

Since an ample amount of reporting is ready-made in the form of police and court reports and is accessible to the writers, murder is an enduring subject among nonfiction writers. Moreover, as Truman Capote had once stated, the first step to write a nonfiction novel is to choose a subject that would not "date". Thus, by writing on the theme of murder, a topic that will endure, the writer fulfills the first requirement for the nonfiction novel, the novel based on facts. Tom Wolfe's definition of this form must be kept in mind when studying this work. Wolfe explains that it

is the use by people of writing nonfiction of techniques which heretofore had been thought of as confined to the novel or to the short story, to create in one form both the kind of objective reality of journalism and the subjective reality that people have always gone for the novel for (Weber 67).

This brief analysis of **The Executioner's Song** is proof of Mailer's ability in creating the objective reality of journalism and the subjective reality of the novel in a single work of art.

Notes

1. Norman Mailer, **The Executioner's Song**. (London: Arena 1989). All further quotations will be referred to this edition and the page numbers will be given within the text.

2. This caused a great frustration in Capote who claimed to have written the "first nonfiction novel" that is, **In Cold Blood**.

I do something truly innovative; and who gets the prize? Norman Mailer, who told me that what I was doing with **In Cold Blood** was stupid and who then sits down and does a complete rip-off. There has never been a greater rip-off in the twentieth century. He took everything I had done, all my hard work and experimental technique and ripped it off (Clarke 400).

Capote's bitterness is comprehensible when one reads the two works for it is obvious that Mailer owes much to **In Cold Blood** for the creation of his work. Nevertheless, Mailer responded to Capote's claim that he "never gave any credit to **In Cold Blood**" by saying:

Well, I just thought that book was so famous that you didn't ave to give credit to it. Anyone assumed that I did **The Executioner's Song** having **In Cold Blood** in mind. But I reread **In Cold Blood** after I finished **The Executioner's Song** and it's a very good novel. It's probably as much of a novel as **The Executioner's Song**. Maybe more. And it may end up being a classic because it is something that is remarkable (Grobel 115-116).

3. However, critic Robert Augustin Smart in **The Nonfiction Novel** claims both **In Cold Blood** and **The Executioner's Song** are conventional historical novels (Smart 100-101).

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