

Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song: The Vivid Example Of Tragic Documentary Novel In American Literature

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Abstract

The article deals with the miserable fate of characters and their problematic situations which led to committing several tragic events.

Key words: documentary, character, novel, The Executioner's Song.

Introduction

It should be noticed that, in his public viewpoint and in his writing style Mailer was one of the initial writers of the description of a documentary novel.

In order to corroborate this tendency, his own assertion may be restated that, he did not create a thoroughgoing, true account of Gary Gilmore's execution portrayed in a massive sphere (over a thousand pages) in The Executioner's Song (1979). In this literary work Mailer employs a full range of novelistic devices, mainly the techniques of dramatization and simultaneously he considers and receives the impossibility of pursuing objective truth in his writing, providing explanation how "two accounts of the same episode would sometimes diverge and that in such conflict of evidence, the author chose the version that seemed

most likely, for it would be vanity to assume he was always right." [Norman Mailer. *The Executioner's Song*, 1998]

The Main Part

Prior to *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer's outstanding effort at creating a non-fiction novel was *The Armies of the Night* (1968), subtitled *History as a novel/ The novel as history* on behalf of the Anti-Vietnam War march in October 1967, in which Mailer himself took part. In order to make his novels more believable he used the transcripts from tapes and movies made of his own participation in the event in Washington. Presumably, Flis mentioned that *The Armies of the Night* is a book of highly metaphorical literary journalism that employs a dual, schizophrenic narrator. The author uses the third-person narration, as well as, a "split" narrator, Mailer, the participant, and Mailer, the commentator.

Author divides the entire book into two parts about the same length and entitles them as "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices". The narrative style is the same in the both parts. The first book, "Western Voices"

Relying on mostly, on Gary Gilmore's life during the nine-month nine-day period beginning from the jail in Marion, Illinois and his re-entrance to prison for the last time in Utah. Generally, Gary is tall, thin and extremely provincial man. He spent most of his life in reform schools or various prisons. He is considered as the epitome of the destitute, a continuous loser. According to his mother he is "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." Therefore, Gary regularly afraid not being able to "make those years up" Most people claim that it's hopeless and profoundly depressing and miserable, not just in Gary's death but in the lives of its main characters. They are married and divorced way too young, sexually violated, mentally ill, chronically poor, psychologically weak. For the first third of the book, Gary's let out of prison on robbery charges, goes to live with other relatives who put faith in his rehabilitation and try to set him up with jobs and a place to live temporarily. Then he meets this girl, Nicole. She's something like approximately 15 years younger than him. They have this obsessive, mostly personal relationship and then she leaves him and he kills a couple people "to keep from killing [her].".

As Norman Mailer mostly relied on interpretation, his one-thousand-page account of the Gilmore execution is a reformative attempt to provide a comprehensive and persuasive interpretation of that event. Mailer's creative and knowable tool of description is such that it allows history to come alive though it happened many years ago.

The apparent datum is that contemporary documentary novels simulate reality, they often develop it to a certain literary degree. Many writers, whose works can be considered as documentary novels are aware of the fact and some of them openly claim it (for example, John Berendt, Norman Mailer) that their narratives can never give a fully accurate development of events, since, as soon as they are narrated, facts appear to have interrelated reflection of the author's interpretation of the reality or history.

Results And Discussion

Literary journalist Tom Wolfe has written followings in his New Journalism:

The most gifted writers are those who manipulate the memory sets of reader in such a rich fashion that they create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader's real emotions. The events are merely taking place on the page, in print, but the emotions are real. Hence the unique feeling when one is absorbed in a certain book, 'lost' in it.

As Tom Wolfe mentioned in his ideas, Norman Mailer intended to impact on readers' emotional world with true life events.

When he's on trial/in prison/waiting to die, she comes back and falls for him harder than ever in reality. A great chunk of the book is the sexy, misspelled, uncannily teenage love letters they write back and forth in non-stop. It is apparently visible why it's such a marketable story, why media outlets competed hard for the rights to it. The Executioner's Song is a truly feat. It is not pleasant but it is an overlook to the way some people's real lives happen to work out, by luck, decision or both in real life. Mailer's writing usually lacks that technicolor and dominant sensation of fictionalized accounts of real people; it is a long drive on a scenery free road on an overcast day, no neatly packaged endings with grand lessons learned but a fade away.

The main character **Gary Mark Gilmore** (1940-1977) had spent almost half of his life in

prison when he was paroled (crime: robbery) in 1976 at the age of 36. He tried to do all sort of jobs while living with his uncle **Vern Domico**. However, as his cousin **Brenda** commented in a pitiful way while Gilmore encountered all sorts of several problems while working, "he was locked up when he was supposed to be learning about how to earn a decent living." So, the disillusioned and unhappy Gilmore, miscomprehended on how to live outside the prison, turned to booze, drugs and ways, illegal as they were, he knew on how to escape from the reality of a larger prison called life. He fell in love with an 18-years-old girl **Nicole** and the love turned to unattainable obsession. When Nicole left him without explaining, unfortunately Gilmore killed Nicole's new boyfriend then afterwards, on the same night, killed a man he had not even met before. This event concludes the first half of the book. It is very touching story because of its readability, its call for a reform in the US penal laws (in fact according to Wiki, this case triggered a nationwide debate on death penalty upon this book's release) and Mailer's crystal clear and emphatic characterizations at the same time.

The second half of the book is not as effective and readable as the first half compared to the parts. It depicts, basically, the aftermath of Gilmore's conviction: death. A big part of this second half is spent on negotiations for the remarkable right point to turn Gilmore's personal life into a movie, the repeated appeal (the Stay) resulting to several postponements of the execution and the eternal love between Gary Gilmore and Nicole that reminded readers of Romeo and Juliet because at one point, they both took drugs as they attempted a double suicide. Taking into consideration the relationships aside from the last one and Gilmore's interactions with his family, his mother **Bessie** and his youngest brother **Mikal** half of the book is extremely boring for some bookworms. Not only it is anti-climactic but it is too detailed on many minor things. Main interest only got up again when Gilmore was finally killed but that was only discussed in the last two parts and they were not able to bring back the emotional impact that this book was able to do in its first half. He was totally strange when he was out of prison, his nature changed in an unnatural way. He wears mismatched clothes, drinks much, commits many crimes, unfriendly, 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" Gary is not only a major troublemaker but also a trouble seeker at times. He tells 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, I drank, shot heroin, smoked weed, took speed, got into flights, chased and caught pretty little broads... I stole and robbed and gambled.... Furthermore, Mailer tried to identify the minor characters as well, which readers can get information about the time, period, even a tour of the place and its inhabitants. As the novel *The Executioner's Song* is a documentary novel, it has some documentary information. Social changes and problematic issues, confrontable circumstances are raised throughout the USA. Real facts and documents appeared in the novels, accordingly a documentary novel gained a significant role in many writers' works. Besides, it was connected with the appearance of new journalism, the initial steps of these genres were put forward by Tom Woolf; within this name countably contributed to the development of a documentary genre, namely Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and others. Remarkably, the history of national facts, as a new literature took up in the documentary genres. Their first establishments are considered to be the notes, religious laws, chronicles, political pamphlets, diaries, letters and others.

In short, the documentary novel in the modernist era is divided into two distinct genres. The fictional autobiography represents an artist – hero who assumes the status of a real person inhabiting an invented situation; its documentary effect. it derives from the assertion of the creator's claim to the privileged cognition and telling the truth.

Documentary effect of a novel is derived from the presentation of real facts, that consist of commonplace constructions of reality. In all its phases, then the documentary novel gives inspiration to tell the truth, associating this truth with claims to empirical validation. Brief knowledge about the genre maintains, if it increasingly calls into question the possibility of truth telling, this skepticism is illustrated more toward the capacity of fictional regularities to interpret and represent its referent.

More apparently, the documentary novel, as defined abovementioned definitions, is not a minor subgenre that can be readily relegated to the special margins of novelistic

production at any selected period. It is acknowledged that there are several “boundaries of the form” in the documentary novel genre,

1. Immersion, or according to Wolfe “saturation” reporting;
2. Structure;
3. Accuracy;
4. Voice;
5. Responsibility;
6. Underlying meaning or symbolism.

Relatively, here it may be included also reliability of facts as the confession of readers depend on reliable data. Characters, also, should be neither invented by the author nor composed from two or more real people. According to Barbara Lounsberry the basic features of literary nonfiction are followings:

1. Documentable subject matter;
2. Exhaustive research;
3. The scene;
4. Fine writing.

It is important to note that, documentary novel genre was initially written in order to reveal the criminal injustices and the public affairs behind the pure society or the deteriorating social problems so as to be considered unwillingness to live under harsh circumstances. In comparison with another writer, Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, strikingly, the viewpoints about these two writers and their writing styles are really different. As in his novel *In Cold Blood* Capote sees fact as symbols and then portrays them as such without alteration, in *The Armies of the Night* Mailer sees a fact, then reveals any amount of possible symbolic values and according to the symbols he portrays that seeing and consideration. Approaching differently, Capote portrays life as significant; Mailer portrays his search for significance in it. Capote presents actual objects in order to illustrate meaning, while Mailer presents his attempt to elicit meaning upon them.

Conclusion

Remarkably, Norman Mailer admits himself that he decorated the novel *The Executioner's Song* with literary colors to hook the unfathomable whys and wherefores of the crime related to Gary Gilmore's life. Strikingly, Mailer does not believe that the novel reveals the outcomes of the events, he just uses third-person narrative and thus he usually confronts from the view of inconsiderable omniscience in the novel. He recognizes the peculiarities around the characters which are moving at times, by way of regarding its originality, *The Executioner's Song* is a tacitly expended and mistakable life and disgraceful death of murderer Gary Gilmore. Mailer thoughtfully structured the text, in regard to *In Cold Blood*, *The Executioner's Song* does not fully pay attention to the comprehensive conclusion about Gary's admissions behind his destructive aptitude. Mailer decides to approach differently so as not to make the readers console with determinable ending, as the conclusion of events he uses Gary's mother as the closing remark, similarly, he offers it to the readers "If they want to shoot me, I have the same kind of guts Gary has. Let them come."

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