

## "War, Materialism, And The Loss Of Human Values In Norman Mailer's *The Naked And The Dead*"

P. Angel<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. R. Vijaya (Mentor)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu.

### Abstract

This study explores *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer, a landmark novel that examines the cultural and sociopolitical climate of America after World War II. Focusing on the depersonalization and degradation of human values in a materialistic society, Mailer's book tackles the tension between the mechanical forces of systemic oppression and an individual's fight for integrity. In the book, war is portrayed as a microcosm of contemporary American life, where monetary considerations are given precedence over ethical and spiritual requirements due to the advent of industrialization and mass culture. While individuals like Lieutenant Hearn and Private Valsen make an effort, if in vain, to oppose dehumanization, Mailer represents the ubiquitous powers of control and manipulation via authoritarian characters such as General Cummings and Sergeant Croft. The loss of individuality, traditional values, and moral clarity in a society dominated by materialism and power dynamics is criticized in Mailer's realistic story, which is punctuated by symbolic elements and flashbacks. The novel's Time Machine parts highlight the wider effects of past and cultural influences on the present. According to this research, Mailer's portrayal of war highlights moral and spiritual decay in modern American society and speaks to a larger social ill. In the end, Mailer depicts the enduring human desire for a better society despite institutionalized corruption and factors that dehumanize people.

**Keywords:** War literature, materialism, depersonalization, authoritarianism, post-war America, social critique, industrialization, human values, moral decay, naturalism, systemic oppression, individual integrity, cultural deviations.

### Introduction

Growing feelings of materialism and economic success were two of the major changes that American culture experienced in the years after World War II. Following the conclusion of the war, consumerism emerged as a powerful cultural force that often eclipses fundamental human values. Norman Mailer's groundbreaking book *The Naked and the Dead*, which acts as a critical prism through which the depersonalization and mechanization of contemporary society are studied, eloquently explores this trend.

Famous for his sharp social criticism, Mailer uses the setting of war to investigate the larger socioeconomic problems faced by post-war America. His depiction of military hierarchy in the book emphasizes the conflict between systemic control and individual liberty, reflecting the inflexible structures of American institutions. The authoritarian tendencies that Mailer believed were prevalent in modern society are embodied in figures such as General Cummings. Cummings's claim that "the only morality is expediency" (Mailer 294) highlights a utilitarian philosophy that compromises personal integrity in favour of alleged superior benefits.

Critics have praised Mailer's skill in portraying his characters' existential difficulties, which mirror the larger human predicament. "Mailer has broken that mould", notes Rosenthal. Although what he tells us is hardly news, it is valuable because it captures the genuine tone and structure of what has really occurred (Rosenthal). Characters like Lieutenant Hearn, who struggles with the moral complexities of obeying instructions that go against his ethical convictions, are prime examples of this genuineness. Hearn's disappointment is shown in his inner monologue: "He had joined the army to fight fascism, and now he was learning about it all over again" (Mailer 376).

Mailer's criticism of American society's shift towards materialism and the resulting degradation of human values is reflected in the novel's portrayal of the dehumanizing consequences of war. The experiences of the troops on the made-up island of Anopopei, which are characterized by "long spells of boredom interspersed with short periods of terror", reflect the existential malaise and alienation that characterize a culture that is becoming increasingly oriented towards consumerist goals. As humans become cogs in bigger, impersonal systems, Mailer contends that the monetization of human experiences results in a loss of identity.

In addition, Mailer's narrative style, which includes "Time Machine" segments that explore soldiers' pre-war backgrounds, critiques the cultural aberrations and social conventions that lead to the characters' present problems. These flashbacks highlight the interaction between social constraints and human agency by revealing the personal experiences that shape their current identity. According to Khallaf, "*The Naked and the Dead* focuses on morals and criticizes the bad manners" of this period's American culture.

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* offers a thorough examination of the tensions that exist in post-war America between the demands of systemic forces and personal integrity. Mailer offers a timeless perspective on the human

condition amid the mechanizations of contemporary life by highlighting the perils of a society that emphasizes materialism above human values through his evocative characterizations and critical storytelling.

## Discussion

### The Conflict Between System and Individual

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* examines the enduring struggle between institutional power and personal morality, situated within the context of World War II. The narrative fundamentally critiques mechanical processes that suppress individuality, epitomized by General Cummings, a figure representing authoritarianism and bureaucratic tyranny. Cummings expresses his perspective by stating, "The only morality is expediency," which underscores his conviction in the unyielding usefulness of power (Mailer 294). His strategic exploitation of subordinates and rigid compliance with hierarchical structures exemplify the dehumanizing impact of systemic pressure. Critics such as Waldron emphasize this theme issue, contending that "the machine can extend its control to the most fundamental aspects of human existence, jeopardizing his very essence and humanity." (Waldron 77).

Lieutenant Hearn and Private Valsen provided opposing perspectives on Cummings' authoritarianism. Both characters oppose institutional oppression, endeavouring to maintain their dignity and uniqueness despite repressive conditions. Hearn, for example, interrogates the ethics of uncritically obeying directives, illustrating his inner turmoil.

"He had joined the army to fight fascism, and now he was learning about it all over again" (Mailer 376). This moment underscores his realization that systemic oppression transcends enemy lines and permeates the structures on his side. Similarly, Valsen's rebellious defiance of authority signifies a broader human struggle for freedom. As Mailer captures it, their resistance illustrates the "condition of a man struggling against the depersonalization forces of modern society" (*Language in India* 127).

However, Mailer purposefully refrains from providing a straightforward answer to this dispute. The ambiguity of the story highlights the extensive influence of systematic oppression. By the conclusion of the story, Hearn is dead, and Valsen's attempts at insurrection are in vain. However, the authoritative characters, Cummings and Sergeant Croft, encounter personal setbacks, as Cummings' aims are obstructed, and Croft is subjected to humiliation. This persistent conflict embodies Mailer's claim that authoritarianism is a "plague" that affects everyone (Chelliah 130). The system's ability to assimilate and counteract both resistance and domination underscores the cyclical essence of depersonalization.

Using literary inspirations such as Dos Passos and Dreiser, Mailer's realistic narrative depicts the deterministic forces influencing the lives of the protagonists. Kazin and other critics acknowledge Mailer's distinctive approach, observing that his novel "differs from Dos Passos' trilogy in its use of social elements to clarify dramatic action, not merely social argument." (Kazin 31). The Time Machine elements, which explore the soldiers' individual history, show how larger social factors influence their battles for integrity and identity. These memories highlight how structural limitations and personal agency interact, demonstrating how social structures support oppressive cycles.

Mailer provides a thorough examination of the conflict between personal integrity and societal pressures in *The Naked and the Dead*. The story challenges the depersonalization that permeates contemporary society by illustrating the dehumanizing consequences of mechanical power and the pointless resistance of people. Despite systematic persecution, Mailer's writings continue to be a moving meditation on the enduring tensions that characterize human life.

### War and Materialism

*The Naked and the Dead* is a sombre meditation of post-World Conflict II American culture that critically examines the entwined themes of materialism and conflict. The book criticizes the tendency, which has its roots in the industrialization and mass manufacturing of the time, to place material concerns above moral and spiritual principles. Mailer depicts a dehumanized civilization in the mechanized military environment, where troops are seen as little more than instruments in a huge and impersonal system. A pivotal character in the story, General Cummings, personifies this mechanical mindset by saying,

"The only morality is expediency" (Mailer 294). His unrelenting quest for control and efficiency reflects society's larger acceptance of materialism, which often sacrifices human values for the sake of power and production.

The narrative also emphasizes how traditional values are eroding and how passivity is increasing in the mass culture. The soldiers' battles against a system that deprives them of their autonomy and personality are clarified by Mailer's portrayal of their experiences on the made-up island of Anopopei. The widespread passivity of mass societies, where people feel more helpless and reliant, has been noted by critics such as Howe. As financial demands take precedence and traditional values are undermined, Howe observes that "disagreement, controversy, and strong beliefs seem out of place in such societies" (Howe 85). This view is consistent with Mailer's depiction of soldiers as victims of a civilization that devalues human life and turns it into a set of mechanical tasks.

*The Naked and the Dead* portrayed war as both a cause and reflection of post-war America's cultural shifts. By using war as a microcosm of larger social problems, Mailer shows how conflict exacerbates materialistic and dehumanizing inclinations. "Long periods of boredom interspersed with short periods of terror" dominate the soldiers' existence, reflecting the existential alienation and commercialization of life in a materialistic world. With its strict focus on obedience and control, the military's hierarchical structure reflects the corporate and industrial structures that defined post-war

America.

Mailer's story does not hold back from highlighting the moral and spiritual decline brought about by these cultural tendencies. Lieutenant Hearn and other characters grapple with the moral conundrums of being a part of a system that prioritizes financial gain above human life. "He had joined the army to fight fascism, and now he was learning about it all over again" (Mailer 376) is a reflection of Hearn's disappointment. This statement perfectly captures the novel's criticism of the systematic upholding of authoritarianism and materialism, even in democracies.

Finally, *The Naked and the Dead* provides a harsh indictment of a society dominated by materialism and dehumanization. Mailer highlights the spiritual cost of putting monetary interests ahead of moral and humanistic principles by analyzing the relationship between war and cultural aberrations. His writings continue to be potent criticisms of the ethical dilemmas of modernity, striking a chord with current arguments against systematic oppression and consumerism.

### The Loss of Human Values

*The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer is a powerful indicator of how war and systematic tyranny have altered human ideals. As the story progresses, we see how troops are dehumanized and used as instruments by a system that values conformity above all else. Characters such as General Cummings, whose whole universe revolves around power and control, are excellent examples of this point that Mailer makes. According to Cummings,

"Fear creates discipline", encapsulating his belief that subjugation is necessary to maintain order (Mailer 202). In a military system that reflects the larger social tendencies of authoritarianism and dehumanization, this dynamic reveals the degradation of human dignity.

By connecting the themes of violence and spiritual corruption to the erosion of liberal and humanistic principles, the book delves further into the moral deterioration of American culture. Mailer's criticism of a system that values efficiency and control above morality is set against the background of post-World War II America with its growing materialism and industrialization. Mailer's responses to this social decay have drawn criticism. According to Randall H. Waldron, the book "shows the price of structural oppression, where power relations erode the soul of man" (Waldron 77). Through exchanges between the troops, Mailer reveals a society in which survival and obedience come at the expense of compassion and uniqueness.

In *The Naked and the Dead*, fear and power become key control mechanisms that motivate the behaviour of authoritarian characters such as Sergeant Croft and General Cummings. Cummings's deliberate exploitation of his soldiers is representative of a culture that values power in hierarchical structures. Similarly, Croft's brutal quest for dominance, shown by his contempt for subordinates' lives, highlights the distorting effects of unbridled power. According to Mailer, "Croft's obsession with control consumed him, making his men mere pawns in his quest for dominance" (Mailer 176). The systematic oppression that pervaded American institutions in the 20th century is reflected in these dynamics, which are not exclusive to the battlefield.

Mailer's portrayal of dehumanization goes beyond simple physical oppression to include psychological manipulation. After losing their individuality, soldiers represent a culture that views people as interchangeable parts of a larger machine. The wider ramifications of Mailer's work have been highlighted by critics such as Irving Howe, who contends that "the soldiers' experiences on the island mirror the existential disconnection of a mass society that values conformity over individuality" (Howe 85). This existential dilemma draws attention to the main theme of the book: the fight to preserve humanity in the face of institutional corruption.

Mailer depicts the severe loss of human ideals in a society dominated by tyranny, power, and violence in *The Naked and the Dead*. He exposes the ethical and spiritual implications of living a life that has been dehumanized via evocative descriptions and sharp criticism of social institutions. The book is a timeless meditation on the difficulties of maintaining moral integrity in the midst of hardship, as it is a potent reminder of the ongoing conflict between systemic forces and the human spirit.

### Symbolism and Literary Approach

*The Naked and the Dead* are literary and symbolic analyses of psychological and social forces. Many topics are reflected in the novel's characters, but one of the most prominent is the conflict between authoritarian and humanistic principles. Characters such as General Cummings and Sergeant Croft represent dominance- and control-oriented authoritarian tendencies. Cummings's behaviour, driven by his conviction that "fear creates discipline" (Mailer 202), exemplifies his representation of mechanical might, while Croft's dogged quest for power embodies the disastrous outcomes of unbridled ambition. In sharp contrast to Lieutenant Hearn and Private Valsen, these individuals personify humanistic principles and fight to maintain identity among dehumanizing regimes. While Valsen's defiance represents a desire for independence and dignity in the face of persecution, Hearn's internal struggle to obey commands represents his opposition to authoritarianism.

Mailer draws heavily on the naturalistic traditions of authors such as Dreiser and Farrell in his writing style. In *The Naked and the Dead*, the deterministic forces at work in shaping human behaviour are reflective of Dreiser's investigation of the ways in which social and environmental systems determine the acts of individuals. The protagonists and antagonists of Mailer's stories are both shaped and reshaped by the social and psychological dynamics of the time. Croft, whose

authoritarian inclinations are fostered by his upbringing and propelled by primitive impulses, is demonstrated through this realistic perspective. Eisinger notes that Mailer's story "captures the deterministic undercurrents that govern human behaviour, revealing the limits of individual agency" (Eisinger 122).

By allowing readers to reminisce about soldiers' pasts via the Time Machine chapters, Mailer enriches her societal criticism. The characters' ideas and behaviours are influenced by their historical and psychological backgrounds, which are revealed in these interludes. This highlights how previous experiences interact with the current challenges. For example, Hearn's moral quandaries and childhood are explored in his flashbacks, which shed light on his fight against injustice in society. In a similar vein, the limitations imposed by society in Valsen's past serve as the impetus for his revolt, mirroring the universal fight against dehumanization. While discussing the Time Machine, Muste points out that it "serves as a narrative device to juxtapose individual histories with collective societal pressures, enhancing the novel's thematic complexity" (Muste 373).

Symbolism and literary devices allow Mailer to take *The Naked and the Dead* to a deeper level than a typical combat story, allowing it to delve into psychological and social dynamics. With its realistic narrative style, perceptive flashbacks, and symbolic contrast between humanism and authoritarianism, it provides a wealth of reflection on human conditions. An enduring meditation on the intricacies of human behaviour and societal institutions, the book illustrates the complicated interactions between power, individualism, and institutional oppression.

### Conclusion

*The Naked and the Dead*, by Norman Mailer, delves deeply into the age-old struggle between institutionalized oppression and personal autonomy. Mechanistic systems, such as those portrayed by General Cummings and Sergeant Croft, aim to control and depersonalize humans, as the story eloquently shows. At its core, the story is about the struggle between human dignity and authoritarianism; protagonists such as Lieutenant Hearn and Private Valsen fight back. However, the novel's ambiguous ending shows how systemic dominance is everywhere and how even revolt is frequently crushed by authoritarian systems. A major theme running through Mailer's criticism of contemporary culture is the moral and spiritual decay he sees there. The story paints a picture of post-war America characterized by materialism, dehumanization, and the disintegration of basic human principles. Mailers depict a culture in which consumerist values and bureaucratic structures supply individual value, leading to widespread existential alienation. The "drift of life over which individuals have little control" is reflected in Mailer's writing, as Irving Howe points out; this reflects a mass society that limits individuality and moral agency (Howe 85). Discussions on materialism, systematic oppression, and human values in the modern day continue to centre on the ideas presented in *The Naked and the Dead*. Even today, and when people are still trying to figure out how to live their lives in spite of all the dehumanizing influences of consumerism, institutional control, and mechanization, Mailer's observations of human nature serve as a criticism that will never go out of style.

### Works Cited

1. Chelliah, S. "Norman Mailer as a Social Critic: *The Naked and the Dead*." *Language in India*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2020, pp. 123–130.
2. Eisinger, Chester E. *Fiction of the Forties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
3. Howe, Irving. *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics*. Books for Library Press, 1970.
4. Kazin, Alfred. *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*. Boston: Little Brown, 1973.
5. Mailer, Norman. *The Naked and the Dead*. Rinehart & Company, 1948.
6. Muste, John M. "Norman Mailer and John Dos Passos: The Question of Influence." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1971, pp. 373–375.
7. Waldron, Randall H. *Studies in Post-War American Literature*. New York: Free Press, 1975.
8. We Need to Talk About Books. "The Naked and the Dead by Norman Mailer [A Review]." *We Need to Talk About Books*, 23 May 2016, <https://weneedtotalkaboutbooks.com/>.