# The Underground Frontier: Norman Mailer's An American Dream

M. SANTHOSHKUMAR[1], Dr. A. GLORY[2]

[1]Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar,
Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu - 608002,
santhosh260993@gmail.com
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu - 641018. Glory70gg@gmail.com

Abstract:
This paper delves into Norman Mailer's novel "An American Dream" as a literary exploration of the multifaceted American experience during the mid-20th century. By scrutinizing the protagonist's tumultuous journey through the underbelly of American society, this analysis unveils the novel's nuanced portrayal of the American Dream as a contested and often elusive frontier. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating elements of sociology, psychology, and cultural studies to unravel the intricate layers of identity, power dynamics, and existential struggle within the narrative. Through the lens of Mailer's distinctive prose, this paper illuminates the ways in which the novel navigates the paradoxical terrain of ambition, success, and moral decay, ultimately challenging conventional notions of the American Dream. This examination contributes to a deeper understanding of Mailer's unique narrative style and his enduring relevance in shaping discussions surrounding American identity and aspirations.

Keywords: An American Dream, Postwar American, Hegemonic masculinity, Identity. American Society.

**Abstract**

The first eight installments of Norman Mailer's fourth book, An American Dream (1965), were published in Esquire magazine between January and August 1964. (Manso385-88). Esquire's circulation during the serialization of Mailer's imaginative metaphysical thriller increased to a record 900,000 (Lennon 339), statistics that were undoubtedly fueled by the book's

controversial content (a description of anal sex in the second chapter). Almost immediately, An American Dream came under moral and artistic attack. It was described as "a filthy book dirty and extremely ugly [...] an assortment of dull cruelties and callous copulations" by Elizabeth Hardwick in her piece for Partisan Review (Radford 34).

In the words of Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Mailer's novel is bad in that absolute fashion that makes it unlikely that he could ever have written anything good" (Braudy 104). An American Dream has received mostly negative reviews about its unsettling reluctance to follow accepted aesthetic norms. Due to the novel's use of well-known thriller fiction tropes and its engagement with themes of murder, sexual violence, conspiracy, regenerative risk, moral ambiguity, and conflict, many critics—starting with Hardwick and continuing through essays by Leo Bersani (1965) and others—have misinterpreted the book as either a flawed work of naturalism or as a violent, fantastical allegory of American social ills in the early 1960s.

An American Dream excruciatingly contrasts with other famous Native American novels from the early 1960s, such as Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 (1965) and Saul Bellow's Herzog (1963), despite their formal complexity and thematic richness, which can be confidently claimed for established or developing aesthetic traditions (Modernism for Bellow, Postmodernism for Pynchon). The complexity of the ongoing critical reaction to An American Dream implies that the book is, in a way, sui generis and that established necessary frameworks will be only partially helpful if we are to unravel the text's most significant implications. I want to make the case that, to a great extent, the foundation for comprehending from the early 1960s, when Mailer formalized a radically open-ended metaphysics that drew on sources like Marx, Kierkegaard, and American cultural history and that significantly influenced his work at both the structural and thematic levels, An American Dream can be found in Mailer's work. Early 1960s work by Mailer embodies, dramatizes, and questions a perpetual issue of forging a politics of progress. In doing so, it sheds light on the complexity and ambiguities of a pivotal period in postwar American history.

In the harshest terms possible, Kate Millett raised to worry about the novel's handling of gender and sexuality themes in her well-known work Sexual Politics. (1969). The significant book Sexual Politics by Kate Millett, which she co-authored, has been the most vocal in voicing concerns about

how gender and sexuality are portrayed in the book. (1969). According to Millett, who emphasizes "the heavy heuristic value which the hero is to acquire from his sexual exploits," Rojack's sexual experiences are unquestionably seen as landmarks along his dialectical route toward the prospect of growth. (11). According to Millett, who makes the stronger case, "female sexuality is depersonalized to the point of being a matter of class or a matter of nature in An American Dream." (12). (13). The novel technically is a weak attempt at achieving verisimilitude, the enterprise severely harmed by Mailer's irrepressible eccentricity, and "its purposes are primarily mimetic," according to Joseph Wenke, the author of Mailer's America from 1987. (99-100). Nathan Scott writes in Three American Moralists that the book is an "implausible romance... the unobservant reader may be duped into thinking that the usual rules of social narrative are at work." (1973). (61). Richard Poirier highlighted the text's divergence from traditional mimetic fiction in his study Mailer from 1972. Mailer "wants to argue that these worlds truly coexist, that the world of the demonic, the supernatural, and the insane is not merely the other side of the world that sets the usual norms by which these other states are characterized as aberrant" according to Poirier. (126).

**Frontier Story of Regeneration**

The story of An American Dream does indeed seem like (in the reviewer's words from Harper's) “a succession of lurid events” when it is baldly stated. Pulp crime fiction, the espionage story, the gangster story, the quest story, and what Richard Slotkin has argued is a crucially American myth: the frontier story of regeneration via violence are just a few of the references used in the book. Stephen Richards Rojack, currently a professor of "existential psychology," the former congressman and decorated war hero, is also the author of The Psychology of the Hangman, a book examining "methods of execution in many states and countries." (Mailer, An American Dream 8). Rojack, like Mailer, participated in World War II. An American Dream's first chapter begins with Rojack describing a lone assault on a German machine-gun post. Rojack experiences a kind of trance during this attack that seems to be brought on by the full moon in the night sky. (3-6). Twenty years later, Rojack is still wed to Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly, an heiress, despite the two being no longer together. One night, Rojack meets Deborah in an apartment she has rented from a friend while intoxicated and on the verge of suicide due to the magical

connection he has with the moon ("my secret, fearful romance with the phases of the moon" [7]). Rojack kills Deborah by strangling her during a dispute. He sodomizes Deborah's housekeeper Ruta before hurling Deborah's body down the New York street 10 stories below.

The majority of the book's remaining pages are devoted to the next 32 hours, during which Rojack is being investigated by the police for the murder of his wife, loses two jobs, visits a Mafia-run nightclub where he meets and falls in love with a jazz singer named Cherry, fights and defeats Cherry's black ex-boyfriend Shago Martin, also a jazz musician, and finally confronts mob boss Eddie Ganucci, who turns out to be working for Cherry. (1). According to rumors, Kelly may also be the father of Deborah's daughter Deirdre (247-51). When Rojack tells Kelly about his crime, Kelly reveals that he utilized his contacts in the CIA and the Mob to prevent Rojack's arrest. Additionally, Ruta's mistress status and potential connections to the intelligence community are revealed to Rojack. The book's climax is a protracted emotional struggle between Kelly and Rojack in which they each issue a challenge to cross Kelly's rooftop balcony parapet. With Kelly defeated, Rojack leaves and heads to Cherry's apartment, where he finds her on an emergency stretcher, dying after being murdered by someone he assumes to be associated with Kelly. Rojack then "lights out" for the region (in the final lines of the book, on page 238: "The long voyage to Guatemala and Yucatan").

"Mailer stands alone among his contemporaries in articulating a coherent metaphysics of the human situation as it exists," John W. Aldridge wrote of Norman Mailer in his 1965 piece "The Energy of New Success." (119). Mailer's metaphysics of development politics may be accountable for much of his work's distinctiveness. It's also possible that this is why Mailer has never been seen as a fully canonical author (as recently as 2009, novelist Jonathan Lethem remarked that Mailer was "fatally out of favor" [254]. Many critics view Mailer as a fundamentally metaphysical novelist with much skepticism due to the prolonged attack by postmodern theorists on the concept of the "grand narrative" (cf. Lyotard et al.).

Regrettably, Mailer has never found an influential critic to support him, unlike Saul Bellow, who did so with James Wood. This is because so much of Mailer's work must be understood in relation to the metaphysics it symbolizes. Trying to understand Mailer's metaphysics as the aspect that has

molded his work does not negate the fact that the work as a whole is frequently disturbing, especially in its essentialist approach to issues of race and gender and in its occasionally fetishistic attitude to the representation of violence. To reject the attempt, however, would be to preclude discussion of several works whose interventions in “the superheated fantasy life” of 1960s America offer a wealth of opportunities for analysis and interpretation. The richest of these writings, An American Dream, deserves special attention because it is worth reading. Mailer's metaphysics of growth, which influences his 1960s work on a formal and thematic level, draws inspiration from various intellectual and artistic sources, including traditional Marxism, Kierkegaarddian Christian existentialism, and the frontier thesis of American history are all examples of this. This presentation will discuss some of these sources, beginning with Mailer's difficult contacts with orthodox Marxism, followed by an assessment of An American Dream as the text that may best embody Mailer's metaphysics (or politics) of development.

While in no way teleological, Mailer's metaphysics of growth is inherently dialectical. This means that while a Marxist framework can be used to explain much of Mailer's 1960s work, it should not be taken to indicate that all other interpretations are closed off or exhausted. It is not intended to suggest that Mailer is an economic determinist in any simplistic sense or that his intellectual relationship with Marxism and Marxist ideologies is anything other than profoundly unique when one calls his metaphysics “dialectical.” (Mailer wryly observed that Das Kapital “had its minor influence” on his ideas in a 1967 Paris Review interview [Spooky 7]) Instead, Mailer's interpretive aim and shifting conception(s) of growth are informed by the analytical and structural pattern of the traditional Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic. Marxism undoubtedly had a significant impact on Mailer's thought. His second book, Barbary Shore (1951), includes an article on the relevance of Marxist theory in the years following the Second World War and the Russian Revolution. In the late 1940s, Mailer was introduced to Marxism by the Polish-French philosopher Jean Malaquais, who translated The Naked and the Dead (1948) into French (Pieces 97). Mailer continued to describe his politics as a "private mixture of Marxism, conservatism, nihilism, and large parts of existentialism" in The Armies of the Night (1968). (Armies 35).

Mailer's view of the person in history is rooted in Marx's inversion of the Hegelian dialectic. According to Marx's famous quote from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852), "Men make their history, but not under circumstances they have chosen, but under the given and inherited circumstances with the help of economic forces," men do not create their history out of their own free will or under circumstances they choose; instead, they do so under given and inherited circumstances. (Manifesto 85).

Contrarily, Mailer's dialectics is radically open-ended about constructing a society structured along communist lines; however, in Marx's case, Hegel and Marx both saw the dialectical process of history as having a purpose. According to Mailer's provisional metaphysics, no single moment (of history, politics, economics, ethics, or aesthetics) can ever be interpreted definitively. In order to conceptualize growth as a revolutionary process, an engagement with potentiality itself, Sren Kierkegaard's work has a significant influence on Mailer's early 1960s writing, notably An American Dream. According to Mailer, the self is a process and a result of historical forces, as well as their shaper and their victim, in a debate that can never end by its very nature. In this way, Mailer's dialectics set him apart from the Marxist idea of an interacting socio-cultural superstructure determining an economic basis and vice versa.

Mailer instead places a higher priority on the radical topic, following Kierkegaard and a later generation of existentialist writers. He stated during a discussion with Malaquais in Dissent in 1957 that “Man is a flow of possibilities and energies long before and maybe long after he is a manipulator of land, properties, and productions” (the essay was collected in Advertisements for Myself [1960]). (262-63). Underpinning Mailer's politics of growth is this idea of the radical subject as a “flow of possibilities and energies.”The first of Mailer's novels to give a genuinely coherent dramatization of his politics of growth is An American Dream. Stephen Rojack is the most fully realized fictional representation of the “existential hero,” a recurring character in Mailer's oeuvre. The fiction is structured as a series of combative initiatory rituals conceptualized as a structural or formal analog of the dialectic Rojack, the existential hero, must travel through to reach a potentially synthesizing encounter with the potentialities of potential itself. As I will argue, this encounter takes the form of a meeting with the Kierkegaardian "concept of dread," a concept that, at each point of crisis, informs the existential

stakes of the text. The murder of Deborah, the subsequent sexual encounter with Ruta, the police interviews, the conquest of Cherry, the strange scene in the nightclub where Rojack shoots "mental bullets" at other patrons, seemingly inflicting physical harm on them, and the final daredevil competition on the parapet with Kelly are all clearly defined dialectical stages of Rojack's initiation that are described in the languages of conflict and violence. These contacts must be viewed dialectically as a potential turning point for Rojack's development.

Rojack is the first of Mailer's main characters to fully and intentionally engage with the ongoing remaking crisis, the cornerstone of Mailer's metaphysics. The novel's format entirely complies with Mailer's explanation of artistic form in Advertisements for Me: “[Form] is the record, as viewed at a moment of rest; certainly, it's the record of a conflict that's been going on” (377). The debate's primary image in Mailer has always been that of war. As Richard Poirier puts it, "War is so much the prior condition of experience in Mailer that any elements not in opposition are treated as mere contingencies." (25). Beginning with Rojack's memories of the war, An American Dream goes on to be "the record of a war," or a series of experiences with the Kierkegaardian concept of dread that, in Mailer's opinion, is present at every existentially significant event. With his trip up Barney Kelley's parapet, Rojack ends his "battle" and encounters "the infinite possibility of being able"—or, in Kierkegaard's words, the pinnacle of existential possibility.

**American Masculinity**

To create an ideal of American masculinity that both synthesizes and interrogates a variety of traditional male roles, including warrior, statesman, outlaw, and seducer, Frederick Jackson Turner's renowned "frontier thesis" is used as a source of inspiration in the mythological conception of American history that plagues An American Dream. The martyred president, John F. Kennedy's spirit, appears in An American Dream from the very first sentence and embodies each of these four male archetypes:

> In November 1946, Jack Kennedy and I met. We had just been elected to Congress and were both combat heroes. We went on a double date one night, and it was a good evening for me. I wooed a girl who wouldn't have been interested in a Ritz-sized diamond. (1)

The opening line of An American Dream, which mentions President Kennedy, alerts us to the complex ideas about masculinity that Mailer's book will invoke and subvert. Additionally, it tells us that some of the concepts from his earlier essay on Kennedy, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," which was initially published in the November 1960 issue of Esquire, will be expanded upon in the novel. (Papers 329). To combine these iconic masculine identities, Mailer proposes Kennedy as a potential embodiment of the "existential hero," who could unify the "two rivers" of postwar American social and political life. An American Dream: The Story of the American Dream must, in my opinion, be read in light of Mailer's working theory of American culture and society in the 20th century, presented at the start of "Superman Comes to the Supermarket." This theory must be understood as essential mythopoeia in nature.

Since Americans live a "double" life, this places us in Mailer's dialectical metaphysics, where the "structure," and possibly even the exact shape, of the myth he proposes must always be "the chronicle of a conflict." An American Dream's title alone lets us know that it will focus on the "subterranean river" and will be a book that deals extensively with the "ecstasy and violence" that Mailer believes characterize the postwar American dream. As a result, An American Dream is a pulp-thriller novel that is neither simple fantasy nor mimetic fiction. (although its reliance on conventional archetypes of masculinity does ally it closely with the pulp-noir tradition of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett). An American Dream is a dream in which the topic and the object are both America. The dust jacket for the 1965 Dial Press edition of the book, which has a circular American flag with altered colors as a warning that it is not a realistic novel about a "real" America, was created with Mailer's help. Instead, it offers a picture of an "alternate" America, the country's undiscovered source of myth and legend. The phrase "superheated dream world" and the "subterranean river" that Mailer portrayed in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" are perfectly encapsulated in the title.

Mailer makes a stunning connection between this ideal life and an earlier American cultural myth, the frontier:

> And after the West was fully populated, the expansion inward developed into a troubled, overexcited, scorching fantasy

> life. As the frontier was finally closed, the romantic notions of the earlier land conquest were cast into the searchlights of the movie studios. Become a vertical myth of a brand-new heroic life imprisoned inside the skull [...]. And no matter how the country's regulators - politicians, doctors, police officers, professors, priests, rabbis, ministers, ideologues, psychoanalysts, builders, executives, and endless communicators - would brick in the modern life with hygiene upon sanity and the middle-brow sermon on the importance of a healthy lifestyle, this myth that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have an adventure, and to grow on the waves (52-53)

The archetypal American story, which, as Slotkin makes clear, is quintessentially a myth of expansion via violence, is reoriented and re-inscribed in Mailer's “vertical myth.” By moving the border, Mailer creates an internal story and mythology of the self in which a radical subjectivity must dare to confront the frontier's dynamic. The “real” or fundamental American story of growth and expansion must now be discovered in the dream life, where the regenerative violence of the frontier must be challenged by the American citizen of the twentieth century. In this sense, Stephen Rojack is transformed into, among other things, the American frontiersman archetype in the twentieth century. According to Slotkin, “In American myth origin, the founding fathers were not those gentlemen who established a nation at Philadelphia in the eighteenth century. Instead, these were people who “brutally tore a nation from the ruthless and luxurious wilderness” (Regeneration 4). According to the author, the hunter myth "became an influencing structure in popular literature and American philosophy." (518). Mailer characterizes Stephen Rojack as the "American dream" of regenerative violence and the "existential hero" who can "capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation" in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket." Mailer represents these hunters, these mythical founding fathers, in Stephen Rojack. (55).

Mailer draws on various sources, including historical fiction and myth, pulp fiction, and contemporary political events, to reclaim the common conceptions of American masculinity. In Mailer's opinion, masculinity needs to be recovered as a generative or regenerative ideal. In other words, Stephen Rojack cannot be viewed as a "character" in the sense of a traditional, realistic character. In Mailer's

Endeavor, he attempts to dramatize his growth-oriented politics to recover and liberate the "superheated dream life" of postwar America. He is instead an archetype susceptible to numerous political and creative constraints. By ascending through the American military, political, and media establishments, through murder and sexual violence, into the fugitive hood, and escaping, Stephen Rojack, the "existential hero," recapitulates America's myth that it's origins are in violence and transgression and paves the way for the beginning of a new, radically extravagant American Dream. Rojack is far from being the main character in a realistic novel; instead, he is "an American dream," a figure on "that underground river of untapped furious, lonely, and romantic passions, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation," (Papers 51). The American Dream is a dream of the hidden frontier, and Rojack is a complex and tormented dream of a frontiersman from the 20th century.

The plot of An American Dream is much ritualized, which is appropriate for a story about the dream life. Conflicts are acted out in the context of the expansion of magical power, which in Mailer's idealized version of America must be viewed as concurrent with “actual” political power. Rojack's belief in magic is not a pathological fantasy, as Wenke observes because the book “is continuously emphasizing that magic has an autonomous, external reality” (101). However, the magic in the book ceases to be an overbearing or disruptive presence. Instead, it becomes a component of the organized dream of recapitulation and evolution that Mailer is dramatizing because Rojack is a sort of “pathological fantasy.” As a result, magic is just as “real” in An American Dream as everything else. The thesis that “magic, terror, and the impression of death were the foundations of motivation” is the focus of Rojack's scholarly work (14).

In the context of An American Dream as a dream, this is meant to be read "literally." Radford tells Rojack to "carry this thesis out of the classroom and into his (dream) life." (35). This assumes, however, that Rojack's notion about magic, fear, and the experience of death is part of a separate "realistic" discourse from The American Dream itself. Many reviewers have misinterpreted the text by classifying magic in the novel as supernatural bursting into the "real." This book has no discernible line between the magical and the real; everything is magic, and everything is a dream or “real.” As a result, magic is regularly used in Rojack's ritualized meetings, such as the

“psychic bullets” he fires at other clubgoers in Cherry's or his infrequent conversations with the moon, particularly the one that takes place on Barney Kelly's parapet. In Mailer's frontier-hovering America, magic functions in the dream world. This is constantly a dream life of expansion. Rojack's journey through the American dream is thus a journey through a universe where magic functions according to Mailer's dialectic of growth. The historical and conceptual presence of the border is ingrained in this “dialectic of expansion.”Slotkin notes in Regeneration through Violence that the traditional American story of the frontier is composed of “a succession of initiations."

In An American Dream, Stephen Rojack, an archetype himself, squares off against other archetypes from the postwar American dream: the wealthy heiress, the hard-boiled detective, the mobster, the starlet, and the magnate of money and power. These represent the “border turned inside” in all of its archetypes. These factors “restrict” Rojack's capacity for aspiration and transcendence. He must eliminate them through a series of “stages in a journey outward and upward toward some transcendent objective” since they are his “adversaries and opponents.” This structure is aided by the novel's serial format, which uses a method taken from genre thrillers at the end of each chapter to recall a classic cliffhanger: “She was dead, truly she was dead” (35).

Mailer dramatizes a crisis that is dramatic at the climax of his major novel from the 1948–1968 period, resulting for the first time in Mailer's writing in an experience of progress as transcendental of that debate rather than merely process and product. Dread, according to Kierkegaard, is “the reflex of freedom inside itself at the notion of its possibility” (50), which is a fitting description of the Mailerian crisis moment in which the issue of growth is perpetually and fundamentally unresolved. A meeting with fear is nothing less than potentially educational for Mailer and Kierkegaard:

> Every man must embark on this voyage to avoid going to hell by not having known dread or succumbing to it. Therefore, the most crucial lesson has been learned by the person who has mastered the proper use of anxiety. (Dread 139)

Therefore, Rojack's encounter with dread is the turning point in his understanding of how “rightly to be in fear.” Rojack discovers and personifies the force known as faith, which is

enormous and supreme for both Mailer and Kierkegaard. Rojack accomplishes this by turning to face the escalating dread that comes with every crisis as an opportunity for personal development. Mailer should use a work that takes the shape of a dream to dramatize this instructive clash. In The Concept of Dread, Kierkegaard explains how the feeling of dread relates to dreaming:

> A characteristic of the dreaming soul is dread [...]. I must therefore draw attention to the distinction between it and ideas like fear and others that refer to definite things, as opposed to dread, which is freedom's reality as a possibility for possibilities. It is the limitless potential for ability. (38-41)

In contrast to fear, dread is thus accessible to the "dreaming spirit" in a manner that terror is not. Dread must be a primal, irrational emotion for Kierkegaard as it is for Mailer. On his journey through the "Underground River" of America's "superheated dream life," Rojack undergoes tests or initiatory rituals that mimic and subvert the traditional frontier narrative of regeneration through violence. This culminates in a final confrontation with "the infinite possibility of being able" (41) atop Barney Kelly's penthouse parapet. Rojack has, in the words of Kierkegaard, "learned rightly to be in dread" through these ritual encounters and has thus reached he finally vanished into a dream Las Vegas before traveling to South America, to "Guatemala and Yucatan," where he may come across yet another frontier to push him into growth. This new kind of synthesis will go after he has taken a brief respite after exceeding the very terms of the novel in which he appears. Because Mailer rejects teleology in favor of a fundamentally open-ended dialectical engagement with the forces of immobility and dread that keep coming back, all climaxes in An American Dream are only temporary.

In his work from the 1960s, Mailer's metaphysics is the metaphysics of growth. Every crisis is an opportunity for growth for Mailer and his characters during this time. Therefore, it is unavoidable that Stephen Rojack will start An American Dream in a crisis that the failures of his personal development have brought on. Rojack senses cancer starting in his cells as he sits on a friend's apartment balcony. He says, "I could feel what was good in me moving away, perhaps permanently, ascending after all to the moon, my courage, wit, desire, and optimism. Will you understand if I explain that I sensed the other illness approaching me at that same moment and that this was the point when the cells began to leap, regardless of whether it took twenty or forty years for my death? (13). Rojack will eventually "learn appropriately to be in

dread" during his final ritualistic crisis, which is the stroll along the parapet of Barney Kelly's penthouse, after going through a sequence of initiatory rites that are both markers of maturation and acts of regenerative violence (Dread 139). It will lead to a brand-new stage of potentiality, a stasis fundamentally distinct from the stasis of the totalizing claims of postwar consumer capitalism and existing outside of Mailer's idealized America. This is how the American myth of rebirth through violence is summarised in the book.

Conflict of some kind, whether it is verbal, physical, intellectual, sexual, political, or psychic, occurs in each of Rojack's ritualized interactions. The encounters Rojack has with Deborah, Ruta, the police, Shago Martin, and Barney Kelly are highly stylized representations of a ritualized development pattern. In each of these confrontations, there is more at risk than just Stephen Rojack's fate (as there might be in a typical thriller); each encounter has a thematic significance regarding Mailer's concerns. By rejecting all "morbid states" in favor of a revived mythology of violent rebirth, Rojack's libidinous battles with death. Growth is politicized in An American Dream because Rojack's development turns into a succession of face-to-face encounters with the dread that comes with each existential crisis.

Of course, the first of these initiation ceremonies is the explicit regenerative act of violence, the murder of Deborah Kelly, Rojack's wife. Rojack claims, "I was feeling good as if my life had just begun" after killing Deborah (39). Rojack has changed from his abrupt crisis into the radically subjective experience of an ongoing concern of remaking, which is Mailer's politics of growth due to strangling Deborah. As a result, Rojack's existence has, in a sense, "just begun."Rojack feels revitalized immediately after the murder: "I felt weary with a most respectable exhaustion, and my flesh appeared new. Since I was twelve, I had not felt this good (32). Rojack experiences "violence, cannibalism, loneliness, libidinousness, hell, perversion, and mess" for the first time when he kills Deborah. If one wants to find their way back to life, they must "pass through, digest, and transcend" these phases. (34- 35). However, the American myth of regeneration through violence requires that Rojack's initiatory ascent through it start with a transgression. This places Rojack's subjectivity outside of the ethical in a world where the solid regenerative forces of libidinousness, perversion, and violence can be confronted and transcended. This is the reason why the work has been criticized on ethical grounds by reviewers like Hardwick (291–94).

The victim of Rojack has a special ritual significance. Deborah marks Rojack's transition from “the visible river” into the “superheated dream world” of postwar America, initiating (or re-initiating) him into uncharted territory. As noted by Rojack, throughout his life as a war hero, congressman, and professor:

Deborah Kelly converses in the “agitated, overexcited, superheated dream world,” which is the language of magic through which Rojack must pass on his way to a new developmental stage. Like the rest of the cast, Deborah's role in the novel is fundamentally totemic; as such, she must be seen as an archetype of the dream life rather than a typical literary character. (though we must acknowledge the profoundly problematic aspects of ascribing totemic significance to a female character defined principally in terms of her victimhood, a case made powerfully by Kate Millett in her examination of the novel Sexual Politics). As a result, Rojack takes Deborah's magical abilities seriously, and the reader must interpret this as evidence of Deborah's ceremonial significance in the story. An American Dream provides Rojack with a new growing issue in each of its eight chapters, which he must overcome to go on to the following phase of his regenerative initiation. For instance, in chapter two (“A Runner from the Gaming Room”), Rojack has a heated sex act with Ruta, Deborah's German housekeeper. He alternates between Ruta's anus and vagina as he has sex with her, using them as totems for God (the anus) and the Devil (the vagina), respectively, in the magical terms of Rojack's newly radicalized subjectivity as a result of the murder of Deborah (the anus). He claims that “a multitude of the Devil's best gifts were coming to me, mendacity, deceit, and a fine-edged cupidity for the strike which snatches” when describing the sodomy act (44). Conflict is used to characterize their sexual encounter: “It had been when all was said a bitch of a brawl” (46).

This conflict's stakes are incredibly high, and the body becomes a holding place for gods and demons. On one level, this is insane because Rojack objectifies Ruta by seeing past her physical form to what, in his eyes, is her true meaning. The juxtaposition that Rojack's status as a figure who is both accurate and metaphorical asks us to understand him simultaneously as a violent rapist and a heroic frontiersman is one that many readers will find extraordinarily problematic and which, for some, may even vitiate any aesthetic value the book may otherwise possess. In this latter setting, through the ritualistic murder of Deborah, which is an intentional evocation of both Western myths and the more explicitly pornographic

and sexist motifs of pulp thriller literature (see, for instance, Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep [1939]), Rojack has acquired both physical and sexual potency. Rojack has been indoctrinated into the mystical systems of the economics of power that govern the book's dream world. It is possible to interpret Rojack's copulation with Ruta in ritualistic terms as an existentially crucial moment in which Rojack's ability to maintain control over the magical powers he has now inherited depends on the location of the semen he chooses to deposit: I arrived at the Devil a little bit late, and nothing was waiting for me. (46). Kate Millet is far from the only critic to criticize Mailer, especially An American Dream, for its unaddressed misogyny. Many readers may find it troubling that Mailer prioritizes the white male subject even in a world of archetypes and dreams. The police, the idealized embodiment of American Establishment power, are the subject of chapter three's discussion by Rojack. When a police officer named Roberts questions Rojack and claims that Deborah committed herself and tries to explain this action in terms of Deborah's belief in magic, this is a sign that Rojack is now able to speak in the language of the dream world into which Deborah's murder has launched him.

Almost every subsequent chapter refers to Rojack's run-in with the law. In chapter five, “A Catenary of Manners,” Roberts and his associate Leznicki question Rojack again. Here, Mailer uses the questioning scene from pulp literature as yet another illustration of dialectical conflict. Rojack can divert his interrogators' attention away from the fact that he is guilty in each encounter with the police. Eventually, he is acquitted by the power trio of mob leader Eddie Ganucci, Barney Kelly, and intelligence agent Ruta. In this, the interests of lawbreakers are placed above those of law and order. (one of the archetypes of masculinity that Rojack embodies and subverts). Rojack has the terminology to lead him through the succeeding ritual stage as the debate moves towards the dramatic but unresolved confrontation with dread. Rojack's interaction with Cherry's jazz musician boyfriend, Shago Martin is the most major rite of initiation through regenerative violence, except Rojack's promenade along the parapet in the novel's last chapter. (114-20).

Many concepts from “The White Negro” are recapitulated in Rojack's meeting with Martin, in which Rojack physically overcomes Martin. This includes Mailer's troubling image of the black guy as a valiant savage. The negative implications of Mailer's depiction of black masculinity as an existential threat to Rojack's hegemony cannot be avoided in

understanding the scenario. In ceremonial terms, the scene where Rojack defeats Martin might be seen as another instance of rebirth through violence. Along with the location where he sodomizes Ruta, the scene in which Rojack beats Shago Martin receives the most undersized defense in all of Mailer's writing. When Martin enters Cherry's flat and orders Rojack to “Get out,” the problems are immediately apparent. Rojack won't budge. Martin remarks, “You bought yourself a stud that can stand,” feeling impressed (184). When things go physical, Rojack defeats Martin with ease. Then Shago uses overtly feminine language to depict the hurt Martin: “Why shit, you just destroyed the little woman in me” (194).

No matter how troublesome Rojack's conflict with Shago Martin may be, it can be understood in the context of the book's overarching mythology of violent rebirth. In the picture above, Rojack lets go of his phobia of “Negroes,” which he describes as a “hard-lodged boulder.” In the actual world, this would be absurd and senseless, but in this instance, Martin stands in for another “other” that needs to be eliminated. In terms of epic, this is a conflict between agents of power that stand in for various facets of the frontier. Rojack is not a leader, yet he illustrates the depths needed to unleash inner force. Rojack learns that his victory over Martin has prepared him for the ceremonial conflict that will take place at the end of the book—the encounter with Barney Oswald Kelly and Mailer's concept of dread, the disorientation of freedom's potential.

Tanner points to the parapet scene's evocative significance in this passage, describing it as “necessary for [Rojack's] psychic and spiritual health” as it sets up a final encounter with Kierkegaard's sense of dread. Kierkegaard also explains the connection between anxiety and the idea of moral anarchy to the possibility of all possibilities being possible, including those that must be recognized as immoral or unethical. This is an essential intervention for my reading. By killing Deborah, Rojack, Mailer's “dreaming spirit,” puts himself above the law and begins his encounter with the terror associated with “the limitless possibility of being able.” In a world of supra-ethical actions where “freedom's reality” is actually “possibility for possibility,” Rojack enters. According to Kierkegaard, dread causes “dizziness,” or vertigo, as the “dreaming spirit” starts to consider all possible outcomes. According to Kierkegaard, the actual moment of liberation is characterized by an extreme undesirability.

Rojack feels a “dizziness” of “freedom succumbing” while standing on the Waldorf Towers' parapet. The feeling of

dread is an instant where “all is transformed,” according to Mailer and Kierkegaard. Rojack, who was already found guilty of killing his wife, must now face the guilt that comes with any encounter with “the dizziness of freedom” to “pose the synthesis” or, in Mailer's words, to mature. Rojack on the Parapet confronts the unfathomable infinitude of possibilities inherent in every crisis of progress as the thesis meets antithesis, the question of growth is answered, and guilt becomes "ambiguous," a term that may be used to define the setting of the story. For Mailer, this clash is therapeutic. What is never explored, according to Mailer, is the possibility that we experience anxiety because we fear losing some aspect of our soul unless we take action and behave recklessly. (165).

An American Dream's climactic stroll up the parapet is the first time in the book that Rojack faces his mortality rather than someone else's. For the first time in dream-world combat, Rojack squares up against himself rather than another archetype. I am ready to die, and he thinks as he climbs the ledge (256). After climbing the parapet, he feels sick to his stomach and terrified:

Rojack comes face to face for the first time with his mortality while navigating the Waldorf Towers' edge. He must be drawn to the potential of death; it is not enough for him to endanger his life. He must be “ready to die.” Dread means this to Rojack on the parapet. According to Kierkegaard, "Dread is a yearning for what one dreads, a sympathetic hostility [...]," in The Concept of Dread. Dread is, in a sense, always one step ahead of the person, drawing him in with hazy possibilities. One fears, yet one desires what one fears. (xii). The egoistic infinity of opportunity, which does not tempt like a straightforward option but instead alarms (angst) and fascinates with its delightful anxiety, is described by Kierkegaard as being present in dread (55). He cannot flee from fear because he loves it; in reality, he does not love it because he runs from it, argues Kierkegaard. Rojack's relationship with dread demonstrates this classic Kierkegaardian ambiguity (40). As he spins in fear, Rojack muses, “I had the urge to leave the balcony and fly” (259).

In The Concept of Dread, Kierkegaard likens the feeling of dread to the dizziness that comes from gazing into “a yawning abyss” (Gardiner 113). The parapet scene in An American Dream depicts Rojack staring into the “abyss” from the top of the Waldorf Towers, lateralizing Kierkegaard's encounter with the abyss. In this situation, Rojack feels the vertigo of freedom's potential for possibility, literally and figuratively. This is a typical instance of a Mailerian crisis. And

for the first time in Mailer's writing, the problem arises from a profoundly exaggerated experience of faith rather than another crisis or dialectical synthesis that likewise presents a new thesis. For Kierkegaard, loyalty must constantly be overstated. As Kierkegaard states in Fear and Trembling (Frygtog Baeven, 1843; translated by Alaistair Hannay, 1985), “Faith begins precisely where reasoning stops off” (11).

According to Kierkegaard, faith cannot be considered within the traditional discourses of reason, ethics, or aesthetics; it must always function outside these frameworks. Faith must be viewed as radicalism beyond radicalism because it defies limits and cannot be confined within a dialectical vision of growth, as in Mailer's novel. As a result, it symbolizes a transcending or excessive growth stage that cannot be shown in the narrative. As Rojack faces his final moment of existential undesirability from atop the parapet, faith is the critical issue at stake in his struggle with dread. When we accept that the ultimate effect of our actions must be unknowable and that every moment of the crisis must be experienced as both radically subjective and radically unresolved, we face the Kierkegaardian crux, the fact that we cannot know at any given moment whether we are acting in good faith or wrong. Rojack's stroll along the parapet dramatizes this crucial point.

According to Kierkegaard and Mailer, faith is the metaphysical issue of the dialectics of growth that is not yet a part of those dialectics and is radicalism beyond radicalism. Faith appears for Rojack after a process of atonement in which he confronts and exorcises his sorrow over the killing of Deborah. Rojack's guilt is, of course, paradoxical or innocent guilt. Kierkegaard says he is "as ambiguously guilty as it is conceivable to be." The guilt that Rojack feels comes from giving in to existential fear rather than moral temptation. According to Kierkegaard, "He who becomes guilty through dread is innocent because it was not he but dread, an alien power, that took hold of him; a power he did not love but dreaded, and yet he is guilty because he submerged himself in the dread which he loved even while he feared it." (39).

The development of a regenerative faith is something Rojack experiences as he completes a second lap around the parapet: "[M]y limbs began to move again; with each step, something positive entered. I knew I could do this at this point. There was a foreshadowing of my eventual completion as part of the ecstasy of my childhood passed through my lungs (259-60). After leaving the Waldorf Towers and completing his second lap around the parapet in Cherry, Rojack senses "the beginning of a heart of bliss" he travels. (261). But after

completing his ceremonial recreation of the American myth of violent renewal, Rojack has been altered by his experience. Through a meeting with fear, he has gone beyond the limits of the legend, and he must now leave the dream behind.

As a result, he discovers Cherry's murder (263), eliminating his final justification for staying in New York. Rojack must now completely transcend the "American ideal." He embarks on "the long trek to Guatemala and Yucatan" in the novel's concluding lines (270), which must be seen as standing for a landscape of excision that cannot be described in the dialectical terms that form the book. After An American Dream, as Rojack and his creator get ready for another assault on the potentiality of potential itself, the potentiality of all humans, the potentiality of America, and—most importantly—the potentiality of the artist to speak the truth, Mailer's politics of growth radically transcend.

**WORKS CITED**

Aldridge, John W. After the Lost Generation. McGraw Hill, 1951.

Amis, Martin. The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America. Jonathan Cape, 1986.

Bersani, Leo. "Mailer and His Critics: The Interpretation of Dreams." Partisan Review, vol. 32, no. 4, Fall 1965, pp. 606-13.

Bloom, Harold, editor. Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer. Chelsea, 2003.

Dick, Kay, editor. Writers at Work: Interviews from Paris Review. Penguin, 1972.

Gardiner, Patrick. Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford UP, 2002.

Hardwick, Elizabeth. "Bad Boy." Partisan Review, vol. 32, no. 2, Spring 1965, pp. 291-94.

Kierkegaard, Søren. The Concept of Dread. Tranlated by Walter Lowrie, Princeton UP, 1957.

---. Fear and Trembling. Translated by AlaistairHannay. Penguin, 2003.

Mailer, Norman. Advertisements for Myself. Flamingo, 1994.

---. An American Dream. Dial, 1965.

---. The Armies of the Night. Penguin, 1968.