

The expanding post-World War II popularity of non-fictional literature nurtured many new talents as well as already established writers and novelists who wanted to express their worldview.

Authors who had previously written fiction began writing life narratives, and the boundaries between the genres of literature and journalistic writing as well as fiction and non-fiction gradually became blurred in a number of works. As James N. Stull argues, this development is an expression of post-war writers' desire to define the world around them and their own place in it.

Autobiography was considered to be a good medium for this purpose and was adopted by, among others, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer. Critics such as Paul de Man, Paul John Eakin, Philippe Lejeune and Leigh Gilmore followed the trend.

This essay focuses on Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), which is based on the actual story of the convict Gary Gilmore and his struggle to be executed; he was the first American criminal executed after a ten-year withdrawal of the capital death penalty. The novel's sub-title, "true-life novel," indicates that Mailer viewed his work as fictional and it is classified by the publisher as a novel based on actual events. This brings up the issue why Mailer would write a novel rather than a biography of Gary Gilmore. As the quotation in the following paragraph demonstrates, Mailer believes that the novel is a more satisfactory medium for expressing truth than biographical or historical works. In order to explicate this quote, what Mailer understands by truth will be discussed shortly in the following analysis. By studying reference literature such as newspaper articles and electronic reviews in order to glean as detailed a knowledge of the events of Gary Gilmore's life as possible, I will discuss Mailer's selection and treatment of specific events from the point of view of fidelity to the 'facts' of the case as presented in non-fictional texts. More importantly, I will in this essay disclose how autobiographical elements in *Executioner* can also be seen in this selection and treatment of events which are strongly influenced by Mailer's

existentialist beliefs. These existential beliefs are reflected in the secondary characters, three of which are attended to in this essay as analytic aids: Gary's girlfriend Nicole, his cousin Brenda, and his brother Mikal.

However, before commencing the analysis of Mailer's existential influence through secondary characters, a presentation of how Mailer himself sees the novel format in relation to that of biographies proves advantageous. By gaining further insight into how Mailer sees the novel as a better transponder of truth, it becomes clearer how this essay will show how *Executioner* contains autobiographical elements. In the following extract referred to above, from a recent interview Mailer compares the novel to a space station. Mailer suggests that the writer has the function of coding and decoding signals in order to make them more comprehensible to the receiver, and thus more capable of transmitting essential truths. Mailer's words are quoted in full as I shall have cause to return to them again later:

I love the novel because the novel is a far better way of coming closer to the truth than history or the essay or biography or any of the other form, mainly because the novel (if it's good) insists upon having some sort of inner construction that you can feel. You feel when you're violating that inner construction and you will get a sense of this element belongs to the novel or it doesn't belong [sic]. At the end of it, you don't feel that you've written the truth you feel like you've written a "space station" from which people can *come a little closer to the truth*. (Ramona Koval, My italics)

The italicised words indicate that Mailer is unsure how close to the truth a novelist can come but he does acknowledge his conviction that the novel as a form comes closer to providing a faithful account of a life or an event than can a biography, for example. However, in this essay I argue that *Executioner* is as much an autobiography as a biography because it reveals as much about Mailer

as Gilmore, for this space station which Mailer claims that the novel allows is used in *Executioner*, and it is while using this space station Mailer reveals his existential autobiographical self.

The fact that *Executioner* is based on actual events raises the issue of fidelity to truth. What Mailer sees as the “truth” about Gary Gilmore is biased by his own beliefs and desires, more so due to the rhetorical language space the novel arguably offers him. As Paul de Man has noted, literature constitutes “the most rhetorical form of language” (qtd. in Magnus 134). When discussing various levels of truth in relation to language-based terminology, Stanley Fish demonstrates in his essay *Rhetoric*, how truth correlates to language:

[O]n the one hand, language that faithfully reflects or reports on matter of fact uncolored by any personal or partisan agenda or desire; and on the other hand, language that is infected by partisan agendas and desires, and therefore colors and distorts the facts which it purports to reflect. It is use of the second kind of language that makes one a rhetorician, while adherence to the first kind makes one a seeker after truth and an objective observer of the way things are. (qtd. in Lentricchia 205)

If employing Fish’s terms, Mailer’s view of truth is one that would make all narrative rhetorical, even journalism:

I wrote in the third person for journalism because my feeling was that one had to (and this goes back to *Time* magazine) try to break down that notion that the reporter is an objective eye because it's just not true. Everybody sees through their warp, through their bias, through their pretensions, through their needs... all of that. (Ramona Koval)

Thus, Mailer completely denounces objectivity and any endeavours to exercise an objective narrative even in journalism, a view he has practised in *Executioner*, both by retelling a “true”

story as a novel, but also by having all the secondary characters tell Gary's story. For Mailer has all these secondary characters see through their "warps," "needs," and "biases."

The autobiographical nature of *Executioner* is furthermore more easily conceived in terms of the eminent autobiographical critic Stephen Spender's criterion of "outside" and "inside" points of view. Spender claims that the autobiographer reveals two "selves," the outer and inner. The outside self is the one that others see and the inner self is that which the writer is unable to see from the outside. While Mailer's ostensible intention in *Executioner* is to present as much of an outside view of Gary Gilmore as possible through the many secondary characters rather than entering Gary's head, he in fact reveals much about himself, since the "inner" Mailer operates these secondary views. Furthermore, the only inside view given of Gary's mind is interestingly enough through the letters Gary writes to Nicole which, by his own admission, Mailer distorted. In addition, there is no indication given to the extent of the distortion or how it was performed. By concentrating Mailer's interest in existentialism it becomes clear that *Executioner* is as much about Mailer as it is about his protagonist. His aim to write an "outer" biographical account of Gary Gilmore's tragic fate proves to be just as much an autobiographical "inner" revelation of Mailer. Thus, if employing Spender's terminology of autobiographical intentions in this discussion, the inside classifies what the novel reveals about Mailer. The outside is the characters' revelations about Gilmore, which are steered by Mailer's own interests, values, and philosophy.

Critics have argued that the "true-life novel" subtitle of *Executioner* presupposes that Mailer's narrative style explores "the necessity of fiction for the apprehension of complex reality," "the fictionality of all narrative," or the view that "all history is in the end fiction." (qtd. in Merrill 142). What these critics have in common is the assumption that, in spite of Mailer's motives, *Executioner* is indeed *fiction*. As such, the conclusion can be drawn judging from Mailer's

comment on the space station of the novel, that Mailer can impose his existentialist ideas on actual accounts as part of his enterprise of revealing the “true” Gary Gilmore story. A hint as to why Mailer chose the actual events of Gilmore’s execution as a basis for a novel, rather than coming up with material of his own can be seen in Leo Braudy’s comment in *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays*:

‘Existential’ difficulties for Mailer’s fictional characters lead to journalism for himself because Mailer has returned by a longer route to test once again the possibility, which seemed lost in *Barbary Shore*, that an understanding of history might bring the fragments of the self together. (11)

Many of the most prominent Mailer critics such as Diane Johnson, Judith A. Scheffler and Joan Didion have noted the absence of the authorial voice in *Executioner*. Richard Stern remarks in his *Missingeria and Literary Health*: “Mailer’s absence is so pronounced that it dominates the book like an empty chair at a family dinner” (qtd. in Merrill 130). Christopher Ricks reflects that “[t]he author of *Advertisements for Myself* is here advertising nothing, least of all himself” (209). As already mentioned, I conflict these critics by arguing that it is the *presence* of Mailer’s autobiographical self in the shape of existential philosophy which is most noticeable in this “true-life” novel. Mailer himself states that “[Gilmore] appealed to me because he embodied many of the themes I’ve been living with all my life long” (qtd. in Merrill 141).

Many of the ideas on which Mailer’s existential philosophy is based are imperative issues in *Executioner*: the individual contra society, individual violence and sexuality as defiant acts, and the necessity for man to more willingly face death and/or commit murder rather than giving in to a self-destructive existence. In *Advertisements for Myself* (1958) Mailer presented the essay *The White Negro*. In this essay he outlined his personal version of existentialism based on the “Hip”

individual. As Mailer's role-model for his existential philosophy, the Hipster doctrine proclaims the necessity for existence in the present, the recognition and nurturing of the psychopathic tendencies of the self, and acceptance of death and a spiritual afterlife. Mailer sets the Hipster against the "Square," the individual embodying qualities of boredom and totalitarianism. In a wider ideological context, George Cotkin poignantly summarises Mailer's version of existentialism in the following way:

To a sexually repressed America, he depicted sexuality in raw, hard terms. To a self-satisfied America, he presented characters teeming with anxiety. To a complacently religious America, he promoted a passionate and violent counterfaith. Against the American ideals of the corporate manager and family man, he celebrated the hipster and the murderer. (184-5)

While Didion brushes aside the signification of Mailer's existential intentions in *Executioner* as "only another test hole in a field he had drilled before, a few further reflections on murder as an existential act" (qtd. in Lennon 79), this essay will present *Executioner* as existentially affected, for instance by establishing that there is an apparent and irrefutable congruence between Mailer's description of Gary and the existential philosophy that includes the Hipster, which comprises the very themes in *Executioner*. For *Executioner* contains not only death as an existential act, but Gary's character as Hipster. Moreover, Gary's amorous and sexual relation to Nicole and his violent conduct stand as further repercussions of this relation, which are all constituents pointing to existential intentions that Didion fails to disclose. The following interpretation by Diane Trilling about *The White Negro*: "Mailer's incipient Hipster has settled the new direction the world must take to save itself; it is the direction of purposeful, as opposed to purposeless death" (qtd. in Braudy 55), also applies to *Executioner*, because this is, as already established, one of the most

principal themes in the novel. In fact, Mailer unequivocally makes Gary's death purposeful by basing Gary's determination to die on ideals apparent in his own existentialism, since the alternative to physical death is the dying of the self that Mailer despises so greatly.

John Garvey, an acclaimed Mailer critic, has argued that "[c]ertainly Gilmore fascinates Mailer for reasons that are as personal as they could be" (qtd. in Bloom 140). Garvey's essay also contains segments of an interview in which Mailer expresses his fascination with Gary Gilmore as a subject:

[Gary Gilmore] possesses the capacity to discover an exceptional solution to a virtually impossible situation. He understands the fundamental thing that so few people understand: it's more important to save your soul than to live and feel it be slowly extinguished. (190)

Mailer's aspiration to write about the individual in conflict with a malevolent society finds a source of expression in Gary Gilmore's case considering Gary's incarceration which functions as an oppressive force, and the Mormon community Gary is expected to adapt to as representing ideals of uniformity, totalitarianism and boredom: "For one thing, Gary wasn't coming into an average community. He would be entering a Mormon stronghold" (*Executioner* 8). Introducing the nature of the Hipster in *The White Negro*, Mailer writes: "One is Hip or one is Square, one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American nightlife, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed" (339). Gilmore is indeed portrayed as a "frontiersman" of this "Wild West" that is Provo, Utah. As Diane Johnson argues, "if Gary Gilmore had looked less like a cowboy, one wonders whether this book would have been written" (6). Furthermore, the story presents a Gary who also opposes to become such a "square cell," who is, as described above in *The White*

*Negro*, “doomed” to conform under the “stronghold,” that in this case can be targeted as the Mormon community, but instead “rebels” against it.

Mailer’s grounds for writing about Gary Gilmore can be more easily debated by concentrating what information is prioritised in the novel, and by studying the amount of space given to the selected events. *Executioner* consists of two equally large parts, “Western Voices” and “Eastern Voices.” Apart from introducing the novel with a very brief one page long reminiscence of Gary from childhood by Gary’s cousin Brenda, Mailer initiates his story at the moment of Gary’s release on parole from a prior robbery charge, returning to the city of Provo to start afresh. Aside from sporadic recollections, such as Brenda’s, Mailer resists the temptation to provide details about Gary’s background until later in the book, when he has established more of an intimate relation between Gary and the reader by closely and diligently following his new life in Provo.

The first tenth of the 1075-page novel is dedicated to Gary’s attempts and consequent failure to adjust to the society of his new hometown; one chapter is devoted to a brief retrospective followed by a thorough present description of Gary from Brenda’s point of view, succeeding one self-reflective chapter about Nicole. The major part of the first part of the novel deals with the encounter and resultant relationship between Gary and Nicole. Two hundred pages into the novel Mailer briefly accounts for the initiatory murder following Gary’s apprehension and arrest. Gary’s time in prison, before and during his trial, is based on the letters he sent to Nicole. The remaining parts of the book introduce Mailer’s ambitious reconstruction of the trial process. In the “Eastern Voices” part of the novel, the exploding media attention following Gary’s decision to be executed and the ensuing trial is described in detail throughout this second half of the novel. Where the opening half that constitutes Western Voices is narrated from the point of view of

secondary characters in Gary's surroundings, in *Eastern Voices* the protagonist is the reporter and TV-producer Larry Schiller, while the secondary characters consist of lawyers and journalists.

The parts of the Gilmore tale that Mailer chooses to recount, and the amount of space devoted to each segment, are further useful to this analysis. As already mentioned, Mailer begins his account at the time of Gary's release in order to emphasise Gary's clash with conformity, which reverberates Mailer's own existential ideas. The dedicated description of the trial also emanates from Mailer's existential motives, for it constitutes Gary's struggle to set forth the execution, and in doing so, pursues his own choice. Michael Cowan argues that Mailer's retelling of events in *Executioner* seems "more engaged by the consequences rather than by the causes of individuals' acts of murder" (qtd. in Braudy, 171); I argue, however, that it is neither. Mailer's plausible appeal lies neither in the reasons why an individual commits murder, nor does it appear to lie in its repercussions. As earlier noted, Mailer's interest seems less engaged in what preceded Gary's ability to commit murder because the environment in which Gary grows up is economically accounted for, part from fragmentary flashbacks by secondary characters. Moreover, Mailer's portrait of Gary from the "outside" also rules out such fascination for violent causality. Rather than focusing on causes and consequences, Mailer appears intent on a highly momentary narrative, displaying trivial every day life events rather than historical contexts, omitting everything non-relevant to Gary and his struggle to die, exhibiting a protagonist who, as the Hipster "exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future" (*White Negro* 339). In a sense, *Executioner* carries out a narrative existential in its own way because it only focuses on "here and now."

The existential nature of *Executioner* and Gary can be further determined through several of the secondary characters. Firstly, through Nicole due to the intimate nature of her and Gary's

relationship and how this educes Gary's existential traits. These traits which Nicole brings out are Gary's violent demeanour, his love and sexuality, acceptance of death and fight against conformity. Although Gary's cousin Brenda confers less insight into Gary and in turn Mailer, hers is the second view to be investigated, because of her relation to Gary as a cousin and her way of describing Gary's early adjustment into Provo as an existential struggle. The brother, Mikal, is the third character to be studied since he serves to enhance the rightness of Gary's existential choice, as initially antagonistic, only to have a change of heart later in the story.

The most valuable insights into Gary come through Nicole, who is also closest to Mailer's own philosophy. Unlike any other secondary character in *Executioner*, Nicole offers perceptions into Gary's passionate qualities which are greatly significant to Mailer's idea of how the existential subject fights for his<sup>1</sup> spiritual survival. This survival is made more evident when Mailer enters Nicole's point of view because it is made clearer that Gary can use Nicole's love as motive for his killings and violence.

The official letters Gary sent to Nicole also were an important source of information for Mailer, allowing him to sculpt the image of Gary into his own vision of an ideal Hipster existentialist, committing many of the highly existential acts acknowledged in *The White Negro*. With respect to the letters, Mailer in the afterword of *Executioner* states that "One wanted to demonstrate the impact of his [Gary's] mind on Nicole, and that might best be achieved by allowing his brain to have its impact on us" (1052). This statement summarises what the present analysis is setting out to show, namely that through other points of view it can be argued that Mailer aims to narrate a more subjectively related view in terms of letting other voices than his own be heard, but reveals more of his interest in Gary's existential sides and thereby himself in the

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<sup>1</sup> There are only male subjects in Mailer's philosophy.

process. As will be analysed more thoroughly, Gary's actions are presented by Nicole as acts of rebellion, violence, love, and sexuality from an "outer" view, when in fact all of which, when seen from an "inner perspective," are acts Mailer professes as expressing existence.

The passionate relationship between Gary and Nicole represents the most significant aspect of Mailer's personal philosophy, i.e. sexuality. However, the "Maileresque" criterion which the sexual experience must fulfil in order to be an existential act is the passion it is an expression of, rather than the sexual act in itself. As George Alfred Shrader notes about the Hipster murderer, it is the "infinity of the murderers passion which intrigues Mailer" (qtd. in Braudy 90), a passion also expressed through sexuality, which gives it the infinite quality needed in order to defy and "annihilate existence" (90). Mailer admires D.H. Lawrence's insight that love requires its participants to completely deliver themselves over to the unknown: "No more existential statement of love exists" (*Spooky* 279). This same idea recurs in Mailer's descriptions of one of Nicole's visions: "It was as if they [Gary and Nicole] stood on a ledge and sorrow was as light as all the air bellow the fall" (*Executioner* 333). The fall represents the complete deliverance that signifies true love for Mailer as an expression of existence, and Gary and Nicole standing on a ledge insinuates such a fall into a relationship of complete mutual commitment.

The way Mailer describes the sexual acts between Gary and Nicole differs from the other accounts of sexual interaction in *Executioner*, separating the existential sexual acts with love from those merely concerned with the physical elements of sexual intercourse. The sequence between Barrett and Rosebeth is an enlightening example of Mailer's inclination to describe the sexual act as loveless and prosaic: "He turned around and slipped it in [...] no movement at all, that's all he needed. That was it, you know" (190). As another example of sexuality without love, when re-accounting the night Gary spends with April at the Motel room, Mailer is more focused on the

barren setting of the room than displaying the romantic encounter between two lovers. April resembles the room to a “prison cell”: “[April] saw the room very clearly like she was looking through a magnifying glass” (236). The word “clearly” and the simile of a “magnifying glass” suggest a heightened emotional presence which takes on negative connotations when opposed to the much more abstract and emotional fashion in which Mailer recounts Nicole and Gary’s relationship.

An example of how differently Mailer narrates the sexual acts with Nicole and Gary compared with other scenes describing sex is presented in one of Nicole’s visits to Gary in the prison hospital, where Nicole’s sentiment is described as “her soul taking the trip rather than any juice starting to flow. They were kissing from one heart to the other – not sex, but love. Right on the wing” (331). The emphasis is clearly put on the spiritual nature of their relationship, it is portrayed as a momentary outer-body experience that accounts a spirituality connected to love, rather than a solely physical sensation. The word “juice” contra the “soul” puts physical against emotional, and further appoints the hierarchical order that is spiritual over bodily delectation. Thus, Mailer does not exclusively stress sexuality, justifiable as an existential act in itself, but rather sexuality as an expression of love which is in turn passion to claim existence, much in accordance with his own existential philosophy. Gary expresses the same existential emotional value of sexuality when talking about Nicole: “Sex was like a sacred thing to him [Gary], a way to express a feeling” (190).

Peter Balbert discusses in some detail this existential value Mailer puts on love and reciprocal spirituality countering the physical sex, which lacks this uncompromisingly important ingredient that is passion. In this case Balbert addresses Mailer’s influence from D.H. Lawrence in Mailer’s novel *The Deer Park* (1957):

True, sex-without-love is often pictured as provocatively embattled and passionate in the work of Mailer and Lawrence, but unless the lust develops into the complexity of organic love, these prophetic artists withhold their admiration of the passion; the affair's depressing conclusions always appear predictable amid the egoistic exertions of its sweaty players. (2)

It is the infinitive attribute of the passion, which is expressed in the shape of love that Mailer has emphasised in the relationship between Nicole and Gary. The emotionally intense portrait of the couple's love-affair seen from Nicole's point of view has much in common with Schrader's interpretation of the Hipster:

A mystic at the bottom, he [the Hipster] seeks to be consumed by 'the spirit of the flesh,' not only 'nearer to' but *identical* with 'that God which every Hipster believes is located in the senses of the body.' Rape, murder, and suicide are not merely antisocial acts; they are *defiant* acts which seek to annihilate existence. Although the murderer ordinarily seeks to destroy only a single person, the *quality* of his passion is infinite. It is not so much the action as the *infinity* of the murderer's passion which intrigues Mailer. As he half-knows, he is obsessed not simply with violence, but with *death*. 'Man's nature, man's dignity, is that he acts, lives, loves and finally destroys himself seeking to penetrate the mystery of existence. (qtd. in Braudy 90)

Nicole's account points to one of Mailer's existential interests in Gary by describing his incarceration as a fight for existence: "She knew what it was like to be in prison. Felt as if she had lived there too. Prison was wanting to breathe when somebody else had a finger up your nose. Soon as *they* took it out the air drove you crazy" (My italics, 91). A similar way of using the word "air" emerges in *The White Negro*, as a metaphor for the defeats of conformity which "attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other peoples habits, other

peoples' defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage" (339). Hence, the question regarding who Nicole refers to in the above quotation regarding "they" (whose finger is up her nose) can be answered in the latter quotation from *The White Negro*; "other peoples' habits," "defeats," and "boredom." Just as with Nicole, in April's remark, "I've been in prison all my life" (*Executioner* 236) Mailer evolves the semantics of the word prison into an emotional and spiritual incarceration that repudiates and holds back existential needs.

Many of Gary's attitudes towards death and the occult beliefs of what succeeds death are revealed through Nicole. Mailer points out in *Existential Errands* that no major existentialist, "not Sartre, not Heidegger, nor Nietzsche, nor even Dostoyevsky, has advanced an inquiry into the possible existence of existential states within death (which is to say: states of dramatic purposeful change) in the dying and in one's condition after death" (190). Mailer's interest in the aftermath of death is evident in *Executioner*, e.g. through Nicole's belief in reincarnation: "To her amazement, he agreed. He said he had believed in karma for a long time" (*Executioner* 78). There are also several references of Nicole and Gary knowing each other from "another time" (83, 88).

In *The White Negro* Mailer states what kinds of existential expressions and desires come from the insight that is living with the notion of death; "the inner life and the *violent* life, the *orgy* and the *dream of love*, the desire to *murder* and the desire to *create*" (My italics, 342-3). Thereby the Hipster's tenet of living with immediate death not only echoes Mailer's way of portraying Gary's acceptance of his execution, but also his violent behaviour and capacity for murder, his idealistic attitude to love, and his creativity. Nicole describes Gary as creative, for instance, when describing him to Sue Baker: "He didn't just draw a little – he did it like a real artist" (82); she also tells Sue that : "She was amazed he could cry" (83). In addition, the Hipster's tendency to engage into orgies is exemplified not only in Gary and Nicole's sexual lifestyle, but in their private

orgy as a threesome with April as well. Through Nicole, Gary is presented as full of inner oppositions as well as outer oppositions which show through his characteristics, as is the Hipster. Gary is passionate and loving, sensitive and creative, seemingly sexually insatiable, violent and murderous.

Moreover, these oppositions are evident in Mailer's portrait of Gary as embodying the complex and frequently contradictory blurring between good and evil, which is a substantial component of Mailer's philosophy. Love and hate fight for presence in Gary. In *The White Negro* Mailer introduces the psychopath, another character type from the Hipster existentialist "repertoire," who "murders out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love" (347). When interrogated why he murdered the two victims, Gary maintains that it was "inevitable" (*Executioner* 395). The latter two quotations encourage a likening between these two texts regarding motive for violence in the existential subject. This similarity can be verified by the fact that Gary had to kill the two men as an ultimatum in order to persist his love for Nicole, or as described above about the Hipster, "empty his hatred" in order to love. Accordingly, Gary's statement before firing the killing shot into Max Jensen's head: "This one is for Nicole" (224), and further, Gary's reply when asked why he killed the two victims: "I did it for Nicole" (403). These comments amount a resemblance between Gary's reasons for practising violent acts and the Hipster role model.

Gary's revelations to Nicole also resemble the theological aspects of Mailer's existentialism. In these theological theories Mailer acknowledges the existence of a God, but one who has abdicated from his role as creator and ruler and handed over the responsibility of the fate of human kind to the individual person. Mailer never refers to God as having an omnipotent existence or any kind of active role in human fate in *Executioner*, even if in Gary's comment to

Nicole, “God created it all, you know” (105), he does acknowledge God’s role as creator of life. Mailer’s theological beliefs are reflected in Gary’s retelling to Nicole of a childhood belief in a “Guardian Angel,” only “it left a long time ago” (105). This scene can be interpreted as an allegory of God’s abandonment of man, leaving the individual person with the obligation to create and form his own destiny. Another example of this abandonment can be seen in the fact that Mailer chose to include Gary’s impotence, to incite the notion of the powerlessness which comes with the choice of your own fate.

However, in this theological/philosophical assertion Mailer’s personal philosophy deviates from one of his sources of existential inspiration, Albert Camus. Also, this is where Mailer diverges not only from Camus, but likewise from the existential fates of the characters in Samuel Beckett’s works, which also served as a source of inspiration for Mailer. As Mailer writes in *The Spooky Art* (2003): He [Beckett] never enters a situation where any of his people might try to break out of whatever trap they are in” (167). In *Executioner*, the philosophical view Mailer argues, which contrasts both Camus’ and Beckett’s world views of an absurd existence from the absence of a God, is the necessity to take action against such impotence by making a choice. Apart from the choice to die by execution, the choice Gary makes in order to supersede such impotence is, as already mentioned, killing in order to continue loving Nicole. Accordingly, the murders take place after Gary’s failures to make love to Nicole.

Just as Mailer’s existential theology advances the theory of an impotent yet present God, it also includes the devil. In this regard Mailer further digresses from other major existentialists, e.g. Sartre. In Mailer’s own words: “he [Sartre] had no sense of evil, the anguish of God, and the possible existence of Satan” (qtd. in Cotkin 184). By Nicole, several similes between Gary and the devil are created; she feels an “evil presence near her that came from Gary,” and when asked by

Nicole if he is the devil, Gary replies that he had a friend who “once asked him the same question” (106). In Gary’s letters to Nicole one can also trace Mailer’s fascination, which he expresses himself in *The Spooky Art*, with “the possibility of a variety of major and minor angels, devils and demons, good spirits and evil” (230-231). Further, on several occasions, Gary describes Nicole as angelic (65, 105, 134).

Cotkin argues that in Mailer’s universe the devil is “afoot,” and he battles with a “God under siege,” “through the actions of human beings on each side of the divide” (187). However, Cotkin’s arguments appear too simplified when employing them to analyse *Executioner*, since they are overlooking the complexity that is evil within good and good within evil that Mailer also displays a desire to embed, often as themes, in his novels. Furthermore, Cotkin fails to mention that such binary antagonism can be ongoing on internal conditions as well, within the individual mind as well as between individuals, as it arguably is displayed in Gary; “But I might be further from God than I am from the devil” (305).

To suggest that Gary personifies the devil would be to reduce the current discussion. Mailer’s existential religious beliefs are more complex, as shown by John Whalen-Bridge: “Mailer agrees that everything has two handles, one good and one evil, but for Mailer there is no Emersonian confidence about our ability to choose properly between them” (305). Mailer seizes the opportunity offered in one of Gary’s letters to Nicole to stress the confusion that results from this choice between good and evil and the complexity such a predicament can generate. In one of these letters Gary writes: “I’m not Beelzebub. And I know the devil can’t feel love” (305). The letter proceeds: “It seems that I know evil more intimately than I know goodness, and that’s not a good thing” (305). As Whalen-Bridge further notes, “[i]ntolerable to Mailer is the separation of gods and devils, of the high and the low, of the heavenly from the red leatherette. His whole career

has been a struggle to discover the meeting place of God and the Devil” (307). Thus, rather than trying to illustrate two sides of good and evil, Mailer appears more eager to portray their opposing struggle within the individual mind, and establish fascination for the pressure put on the individual standing at the crossroads between good and evil. One of Gary’s letters to Nicole concludes, “[w]e always have a choice, don’t we?” (306). In *Executioner*, Mailer emphasises the actual existence of such a choice: Apart from Gary’s choice of killing or ceasing to love, Mailer also presents Gary’s decision to die as an existential choice by “Maileresque” standard. This is a choice which balances between, firstly, the alternative of killing and/or dying, and secondly, letting the “devil” that is conformity, boredom and the “squareness” that belongs to the Hipster philosophy overtake him and thereby eventuate in his self-deterioration. Mailer himself has at one point declared that “[w]e have profound choices to make in life, and one of them may be the deep and terrible choice most of us avoid between dying now and ‘saving one’s soul’...in order, conceivably, to be reincarnated” (qtd. in Merrill 140). In the light of this quotation, a theory on the most pivotal reason for Mailer to write Gilmore’s story emerges, which is his evident admiration for Gary’s courage to make this particular choice. For Mailer surely sees in Gary the philosophical insight to embrace the understanding that it leaves a self-destructive alternative, which is to be subjected to spiritual nihilism. Laura Adams has also observed this highly central existential theme in Mailer’s other strictly fictional writings, which is physical death in order to prevent spiritual disintegration, here in *The Deer Park*: “This is what to Mailer is an existential situation, where one acts despite his fear and grows or, like Eitel,<sup>2</sup> dies a little more.” (*Existential* 50). These heroic attributes that equal facing up to such a decision are palpable in Gary’s character in one of his conversations with Nicole: ““That was the whole point of living’, he said, ‘facing yourself. If you

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<sup>2</sup> One of the fictional characters in *The Deer Park*.

didn't, the burden got bigger'" (78). Once again, via Gary's letters to Nicole, Mailer manages to put forth issues that are eminent to his personal philosophy. The confusion Gary experiences within the uncertainty and anxiety that the pressure of choice emanates indeed strike a resonant chord with Mailer's own.

Hence, judging from Nicole's point of view, what Mailer conceivably is intent on doing is to raise the earlier mentioned issue of the moral and emotional ambivalence that derives from the perplexing choice between good and evil, rather than having Gary symbolically embodying the devil. Although Whalen-Bridge does not mention *Executioner* in his essay as containing any "Adamic" existential allusions, there are several facts indicating that Mailer has included such allusions to encourage a likening of sorts. The aspect of the Adamic myth which Mailer seems eager to engage in *Executioner* is the Fall of Man, which is elicited by Brenda, as well as by Nicole; "He [Gary] told her that he hoped no unnecessary tragedies would ever befall them. She had a rush of memories then like falling down in a dream" (88). Moreover, one of the chapters of the novel is entitled *Fear of Falling*, and Bessie has a similar experience describing a sensation where she "felt the vertigo at the fall through all those years" (316). The vertigo experienced by Bessie at the "fall" hints to the "existential dread" announced by Whalen-Bridge.

The biblical connotations of the word "falling," suggesting the Fall of Man has existential importance in the novel. For in *Executioner*, Mailer shows that fate is in the hands of man, who is alone responsible, for not only himself, but the fate of God as well. As described by Mailer in *Advertisements*, such a supposition occurred early on in his career when he first saw Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Even though the existential themes of Beckett's drama were to a greater extent based on the French philosophical traditionalist view of man's existence as absurd<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Briefly, the word "absurd" translates as the hopelessness that the absence of a God causes.

than what Mailer later moulded into his own philosophy, Mailer points out that the notion in *Godot* that “God’s destiny is flesh and blood with ours” (*Advertisements* 324) affected him greatly. Herein enters the existential stance Mailer is feebly eager to confer in Gary’s example; that by making a choice, Gary takes control of his own destiny that he, as all men, has been left to affect since God is no longer governing the course of events. Brenda recalls when Gary stopped her falling from the apple tree in the first line of the novel, stopping the Fall of Man, embracing his own fate by taking a stand rather than waiting for an impotent God to take it for him. Whalen-Bridge comments in his essay *The Myth of the American Adam in late Mailer*:

The coexistence of Adam-before-the-Fall and Adam-Fallen is a puzzling theme in Mailer’s work, since to understand it we must fuse Adamic linguistic confidence and existential dread. Mailer insists that our moral action is predicated on a Kierkegaardian uncertainty, and his novels develop this moral insight in a variety of ways. (307)

Through Brenda, Gary also exposes several values which are in accordance with Mailer’s existential principles. Hers is the first view of Gary offered in the novel, in the shape of a brief childhood memory. Unlike Nicole, Mailer’s ability to express existential beliefs is moderate through Brenda. Also unlike Nicole, Brenda is not significantly descriptive of Gary’s amorous side. However, the blood relation Brenda has to Gary provides Mailer with an opportunity to present a very brief yet effective childhood portrait of Gary, as well as a greater ability to further elucidate the Adamic elements of his philosophy.

Returning briefly to the discussion of Adamic influences on Mailer’s existential philosophy, it is valid to Brenda’s account of Gary how this underlying myth, which according to Whalen-Bridge, appears as allusions in Mailer’s fiction. Once again, Brenda’s affectionate recollection of Gary suggests such a comparison: “Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She

climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down” (5). This very first sentence in the novel contains the words “apple,” “tree,” and “falling,” and recalls Adam in the Garden of Eden. This allusion applies to the main issues that Mailer’s existentialism contains according to Cotkin; “the necessity to experience sin in order to be saved, and the blurred line between sin and salvation” (186). A parallel between Gary and the Adamic myth is further implied by the relation he has with Brenda in the scene where he tries to convince her to help Gary escape by taking him to the state line after the killings, only to find his request denied: “I’d have done it for you” (281). Brenda’s betrayal of Gary by turning him in to the authorities is also reminiscent of the Garden of Eden.

Perhaps the most obvious side Brenda presents of Gary is his childlike and almost naive conceptions of conforming after his time in prison. Conformity is an existentially important issue in *Executioner*, and it constitutes one of the most fiercely attacked concepts by Mailer’s Hipster philosophy. As theorised in *The White Negro*, the “slow death” of this conformity which “stifles” every “creative and rebellious instinct” (339) has a notable effect on Gary through Brenda due to her function of being the first to see him adjust directly after his release from prison. Gary’s initial innocence in conforming is described by Brenda right after picking Gary up and making a stop at a bar, where she is affected by Gary’s fascination for a jukebox: “He looked close to being dazzled by the revolving red, blue and gold light show,” and further; on his reaction when seeing a couple of girls: “Gary mumbled, ‘Not bad,’ Brenda laughed. There was something so real about the way he said it” (14). Several other similar indications of Gary’s introductory innocence are presented via Brenda to produce a stronger subsequent clash between this innocence and Gary’s following failures to conform. Furthermore, this initial ingenuous behaviour is later transformed into defiance and destructiveness.

One example of Gary's refusal to conform presents itself in the scene, described from Brenda's point of view, when the two of them visit the cinema: "Brenda grabbed him [Gary] by the shirttail. 'You're obnoxious.'" (58). Gary's disturbing behaviour during the screening constitutes one of the earliest symptoms of Gary's rebellion against conformity. However, more importantly, this event is further interesting because the movie shown is Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Mailer thereby plays on the imagery associated with such a film, which is just that, defying a conformed environment. The movie is continually referred to in *Executioner* by Gary: "This is one movie I want to see again" (226). Additionally, Gary names Ken Kesey<sup>4</sup> as one of his favourite novelists (526).

The third and final view to be investigated is the insight Mailer provides on Gary through his brother, Mikal. As the brother, Mikal offers, similar to Brenda, a brief background of Gary. However, in order to bring about a different effect, which is through his understanding of Gary's decision to die. Unlike Brenda's version as being the first to not only tell the story, but also to meet Gary and offer the first impression of him, Mikal enters the course of events halfway into the novel after the trial incidents have set forth and Gary decides to push for a death sentence.

In order to demonstrate the extent to which Mikal is affected by Gary's insight in making his "Maileresque" existential choice to die rather than suffer spiritually corrosion, Mailer at first presents Mikal's initiatory reaction upon his brother's crimes as hateful (499) and with shock (451) and shame (500), to later enunciate that Mikal is convinced that Gary's choice is the right one. A concise account is given of Mikal's very limited experience of criminality and violence, when he relates to the latter as a "substance" that; "licked right up to the edges of the store and left a spew like that yellow foam on city beaches where old rubber dries out with jellyfish and

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<sup>4</sup> Author of the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1973), on which the film with the same title was based.

whiskey bottles and dead squid” (499). Herein, a contrast emerges when juxtaposing the previous quotation of disgust with the empathic face Mikal can put on such violence and criminality when later encountering Gary. The new means of revelation of Gary’s person that is Mikal represents more of an “outer” view than what Brenda or Nicole are made to contribute with, since the two latter characters, at this stage of events, have more experience of Gary’s violent sides than Mikal, who enters much later in the course of events. In fact, Mikal’s sudden entrance into the novel is emphasised by Mailer to represent the outside view of a person who reacts to violence with disgust and hate, as the above quotation demonstrates, but later is convinced otherwise.

Mikal’s laconic flashbacks, which Mailer chooses to reveal in this critical middle part of the novel, promote Gary’s attitude to death as an existential choice. The chapter where Mikal enters the course of events ends with such a recollection, and concerns Gary’s reaction to the two of them barely evading a car-crash which had been caused by Gary’s temper: “‘You almost got us killed,’ Mikal shouted. Gary was breathing deeply. He lay his forehead on the steering wheel. ‘Sometimes,’ he said, ‘you have to be able to face that’” (501). By being the only one to actively fight against Gary’s execution and refuse to understand Gary’s choice, Mikal embodies the contrary view to Mailer’s existentialist belief to choose death over self-deterioration of the soul.

Gary’s comment on one of Mikal’s prison visits on the subject of such self-deterioration makes Mikal start to change his mind: “His brother’s voice kept saying ‘I don’t have anything left in me.’ Mikal wanted to disappear into a place where choices did not exist” (846). Through Mikal, Mailer subtracts Gary’s heroic and existential features by highlighting, not only Mikal’s failure to comprehend that such a choice can and must be made, but also by describing Mikal’s shunning away from this choice. This calls upon the quotation earlier used in this essay, where Mailer airs his conviction of the choice of dying over spiritual death: “We have profound choices to make in

life, and one of them may be the deep and terrible choice most of us avoid between dying now and ‘saving one’s soul’ ...in order, conceivably, to be reincarnated” (qtd. in Merrill 140). The “most of us” Mailer refers to, who “avoid” these choices could be argued to be embodied by Mikal, who does react with fear and refusal to such a conclusion.

Further existential elements are introduced when Gary recites Nietzsche at their last meeting: “‘He [Nietzsche] wrote that a time comes when a man should rise to meet the occasion. That’s what I’m trying to do, Mikal’” (847). During their last meeting Gary also delivers the haunting line to Mikal: “See you in the darkness” (866); a statement that most likely intrigued Mailer by implying the existence of an afterlife, echoing one of the criteria for the Hipster figure in *The White Negro*, which is a belief in reincarnation.

As I have shown, manifesting Gary as an existentialist is most successfully achieved for Mailer when entering Nicole’s point of view. For by using Nicole as interpreter Mailer can come closer to the essence of Gary’s passion than any of the other secondary characters, including Brenda and Mikal. As with the other points of view presented in *Executioner*, Nicole’s is restricted to that of the “outside” view of Gary (with the exception of the letters). As seen in the actual hearings and interviews, Gary appoints Nicole to be the reason for killing the two victims, but Mailer convincingly uses the “space station” he claims that the novel allows to imply those motives to be founded in his own existential ideology.

To a greater extent than Mikal or Brenda, Nicole is the view Mailer operates to express Gary as an existentialist by Mailer’s own criteria. Nicole serves to enhance Gary’s motives for the killings, but her character also allows Mailer to illustrate her life with Gary as that of two lovers whose existence is overflowing with sexuality, but a sexuality which existentially justified because it is rooted in love. Nicole and Gary’s intimacy allows Mailer to further pursue the existentialist he

sees in Gary, in terms of living with an acceptance of bodily death in order to experience great passion in compelling accordance with the idealist example of the Hipster from *The White Negro*. Furthermore, the existentialist influence is also evident in Gary's belief in a spiritual afterlife and in his realisation of the importance of making a choice between spiritual erosion and death in a world without a God for man to depend upon. As shown in this essay, Brenda reveals the non-conformist in Gary, and works as an amplifier for the sporadic allusions Mailer makes to the Fall of Man as an existential allegory for human responsibility. Mikal's account chiefly serves to make Gary's decision to die as an existential act more convincing.

Considering these three perspectives, the quotation of Mailer's statement regarding the novel format proves useful in arguing the autobiographical presence of Mailer in this analysis. Because, by using these several points of view Mailer can practice the "inner construction" he argues in the quotation that the novel allows, by having different points of view which are secondary characters experiencing and expressing their truths. On the other hand, as the role of author, Mailer controls these three perspectives as a "master of puppets," as it were, by having them represent his existential truth about Gary Gilmore, if not decoding than deciphering the signals through the space station offered to the reader, using his own existentialist influence.

I love the novel because the novel is a far better way of coming closer to the truth than history or the essay or biography or any of the other form, mainly because the novel (if it's good) insists upon having some sort of inner construction that you can feel. You feel when you're violating that inner construction and you will get a sense of this element belongs to the novel or it doesn't belong [sic]. At the end of it, you don't feel that you've written the truth you feel like you've written a "space station" from which people can *come a little closer to the truth*. (Ramona Koval, My italics)

As Laura Adams contends, Mailer validates truth as “the summary of the sentiments and actions of all those concerned with an event, which in turn creates other sentiments and actions. The artist has a special ability to imaginatively relate all of these ‘truths’ into a whole” (52). *Executioner* does indeed practise this technique, the “summary of sentiments” from “all those concerned with an event” which Adams discusses is, as noted, evident in the secondary characters who separately offer their “truths.” However, just as Adams additionally states, it is the “summary” of all these truths into a “whole” which this essay has argued is affected by Mailer’s existential beliefs. This autobiographical influence is the very thing Mailer has tried to steer clear of by deliberately making it as biographical and “factual” as he could: “Working on *The Executioner’s Song*, I wanted it to be as accurate as I could possibly make it” (qtd. in Jones 2). The *Executioner’s Song* as biographical literature encourages comparison with other literary accounts of Gary Gilmore and his tragic fate. Mikal Gilmore’s biography entitled *Shot in the Heart* would definitely prove fruitful for such an analysis. The “inner” and “outer” views presented in this essay could be utilised on Mailer’s *Executioner* and Mikal’s work, where firstly Mikal’s biography would represent the “inner” account of Gary Gilmore, and secondly, Mailer’s novel would constitute the “outer” journalistic view presented in *Executioner*. This type of analysis would invite much fascinating debates on validity of and fidelity to truth in the autobiographical critical field using two most interesting sources of comparison. Further, an analysis on the subject of violence regarding contemporary and historical America could found its discussion on the contextual implications to a historical interest throughout *Executioner*.<sup>5</sup> One could construct such an essay on Mailer’s theories of a collective and individual violence that stand as a repercussion of the past immigration and slavery that constitutes contemporary Americans. Mailer’s belief could be pursued to raise

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Brenda’s account of her Mormon great-grandfather’s experiences (10), or the reference to

issues of how the lack of a history to call their own, the violence of multiethnic American society originates from anger caused by confusion of identity. Additionally, this type of essay could note that Mailer had the title *American Virtue* in mind for this novel.

A literary critic set out to write about *Executioner* could do worse than elaborate the observation made by Robert Merrill, that Larry Schiller's role is similar to Mailer's own in his novel *Armies of the Night* (1968) which bears the subtitle *History as novel-the novel as history*. The essayist could investigate Mailer's role as journalist/writer and how he self-evaluates his obligations to both, and the outcome of such a junction between two roles, as Mailer plays with these roles in both titles but in different ways. Such an essay would also in a successful way cover the effects of Mailer's narrative technique that is referring to himself in the third person in *Armies*, and letting Schiller enact a role similar to his own also through the third-person perspective in *Executioner*.

In *The Executioner's Song* Mailer has eagerly tried to make a point out of being as absent as he could possibly be from a novel, a fact also observed by several renowned critics. In order to take the fictional connotations out of *Executioner* as much as possible, Mailer subtitled his large-scale work as a "true-life" piece of literature. In addition, Mailer has crafted his narration in a way which presents an unprecedented lack of stylish influence from what is commonly known (by for instance Joan Didion), as a stylistically obsessed writer. Mailer has also entitled the book in order to proclaim that the story, i.e. the Song, comes from of the executioner, but letting the Eastern and Western Voices that comprise the secondary characters sing the song rather than sing it himself. Interview extracts in this essay have shown that Mailer claims that his intention was to write Gary

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Gary's attorney, Dennis Boaz's, family history (528).

Gilmore's story with as much objectivity as possible, and his minuscule research work supports such an assertion.

However, such an enormous task as *Executioner* obligates Herculean motivation and a considerable amount of interest on the writer's behalf, and in Mailer's case such an interest appears to be the same as that which inspires him to write strictly fictional literature. Motives of this sort are, as shown in this essay, vaguely admitted by Mailer. Despite this, the extent to which these motives steer the text is less acclaimed. This is where my essay has entered the discussion, by highlighting the space station quotation, and consequently, having my discussion pivot around this quotation in order to unveil how Mailer steers the text, using the novel format of *Executioner* as a means of navigation towards his existential harbour.

What the reader is to have gained in the aftermath of this essay is a refined ability to see the extent to which a writer can affect a story, in spite of "true-life" labels or journalistic intentions. Even if an author, like Mailer in this case, takes on the task of reporting events that have actually taken place, there is always a highly autobiographical value to *why* these events are chosen by the writer in question, and subsequently of course, how they are retold. In Gary Gilmore Mailer saw an existentialist, and consequently he portrayed him as such by choosing to write a novel rather than a biography because of the space station of the novel which allows Mailer to perform such a task.

In addition, this essay will hopefully intensify the aesthetic value of *Executioner* by having demonstrated how Mailer's truth about Gary Gilmore has a more individual essence than any factual re-accounts of Gilmore's person, and thereby issues a truth that is a contribution to the multitude of truths rather than simply diverting from what "actually" took place in the Gary Gilmore saga. Aristotle reflected on contrary views on truth, declaring that they should not

“distort the facts but to discover them; the setting forth of contrary views of a matter will have the beneficial effect of showing us which of these views much accords with the truth” (qtd. in Lentricchia 206). In the light of a statement from such an erudite philosopher, Mailer’s existentially influenced approach to truth appears more enriching than digressing.

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