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Hunter S. Thompson and gonzo journalism as literature

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HUNTER S. THOMPSON AND GONZO JOURNALISM AS LITERATURE

A Thesis
Presented To
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Michael P. Kiernan
Spring 2015

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Hunter S. Thompson and Gonzo Journalism as Literature

1. Introduction:

The purpose of this thesis is to assert that Hunter S. Thompson's contributions to American literature and culture were significant in spite of his dissolute lifestyle often noted by critics. He was often viewed as a journalist, but each of the works to be addressed in this thesis is more than simply journalism, or drug-addled gibberish. They are prescient cultural criticisms of the state of America during the convulsive period of 1964 to 1973. Each piece makes a larger statement about the degeneration of morality, corporate and political greed, and the corruption engendered by the U.S. capitalist system. Thompson was misunderstood and underappreciated for the literary merits of his writing.

Thompson's central theme throughout all of his work was the death of the American Dream. All the pieces highlighted here, as well as his later work and political activities, revolved around and reflected the notion that the American Dream, in terms of the Horatio Alger story and participatory democracy, was dying. He empathized with the Angels who had no place in an increasingly technological society. He chose the Kentucky Derby as the perfect tableau of American decadence and vulgarity. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is centered in the titular city. What better place to showcase the cheapening and commercialization of America than Las Vegas? Las Vegas is portrayed as a place where the lines between morality and depravity are blurred by king cash. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* reflects the machinations, contradictions, and "good old boys" nature of American national politics.

The first section of this thesis will assess two early works consisting of Thompson's article, "The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders," and the book *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, which followed the article. The second section begins with a comprehensive

look at definitions, notable practitioners, and their conceptions of what constituted “The New Journalism” of the period. This examination is important because Thompson was the earliest new journalist to fit the criteria of this new genre, and except for recognition by Tom Wolfe, research shows that Thompson’s style and contributions to the genre almost always took second-place to more famous writers, almost all of whom, notably, were based in New York. Thompson seemed to be the West Coast outlier among the group. “If attempting to determine Thompson’s role in literature by searching scholarly journals, one will have trouble finding his name. And even more trouble finding him treated seriously. You’ll find him many times alongside Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer as an example of that newfangled New Journalism” (Grubb 1). This section will also assess criticisms of three pieces of what were then termed “Gonzo” journalism: “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. The third section will assess Thompson’s participation in politics and his impact on the culture of the period.

The conclusion will stress Thompson’s importance to American culture as a writer, outspoken critic, political activist, and voice of the rising anti-establishment generation of the period. It will also question the cultural relevancy of “The New Journalism.” The conclusion will also examine the “Gonzo” cult that he allowed to be built up around himself through passive encouragement as well as active cultivation. It will try to define what “Gonzo” means in specific terms, and how his cultivation of that image could very well have led to his decline in reputation among other writers and scholars later in life.

An outline of this thesis is offered here for the sake of convenience:

1. Introduction
2. How Thompson Got His Start
3. Subject Makes Method
 - 3.1. The Objective Stance
 - 3.2. Brutish Good Samaritans
 - 3.3. The Sense of Brotherhood
 - 3.4. The Outlaw Tag
 - 3.5. The Necessity of Otherness
4. Different Types of Counter-Culture
5. Thompson as Social Critic and “Outlaw”
6. The New Journalism as Literature
7. Immersion as the Distinctive Basis of Thompson’s Writing
8. Gonzo Journalism as Literature
 - 8.1. “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”
 - 8.2. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*
 - 8.3. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*
9. Thompson as Critic of Politics and Culture
10. Conclusion

2. How Thompson Got His Start:

Hunter S. Thompson was unique in the annals of American literature and journalism. He seemed to burst on the scene with his book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, and became a sensation. With *Hell's Angels*, and the article that precipitated it, "The Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders," he was a progenitor of new journalism long before more famous writers took it up, or had even given it a name. Thompson had a way of relating to the common man. His style in both pieces is simple, direct, and not hampered by any kind of censorship or influence from above. He cuts through the exaggeration employed by law enforcement and the national media and gives an astute and colorful accounting of the lives and lifestyles of an insular subculture, which, up until he wrote about them, was impenetrable by any other journalist alive. While admiring the image presented by the Hell's Angels in full regalia on their huge gleaming machines, he is unabashed in showing the underbelly of their existence at the same time

Thompson was not really an overnight sensation. By 1964 he was twenty-seven years old and had already been a freelance feature writer for various periodicals for nine years, submitting articles to whoever would pay. He spent two years, '62-'64, covering mostly politics all over South America, primarily for the now defunct *National Observer*. He also wrote cultural pieces on occasion. Several times he found himself in the company of remote tribes relying on their hospitality. He travelled almost hand-to-mouth during most of that period.

Back in California that year, Carey McWilliams of *The Nation*, approached Thompson to write an article about the Hell's Angels motorcycle club and the phenomenon of outlaw bike groups in general. In his reply to McWilliams, Thompson's vision of how he would like to structure the article gives an indication of the style and approach which would become his

trademarks in later works. "Tomorrow or the next day I'll try to see some of the cycle people; I can't imagine doing a story without their point of view [. . .]. To my mind the Hell's Angels are a very natural product of society [. . .]. But different people. That's what I'd like to find out: who are they? What kind of man becomes a Hell's Angel? And why? And how? The mechanics "(*Proud Highway* 497). The only proper way to do that, in Thompson's mind, was to fully immerse himself in his subject.

The article was published in 1965. It was entitled, "The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders." It is an account of a Hell's Angels run (outlaw parlance for a weekend, usually holiday, road trip, and party) to Monterey from San Francisco on Labor Day weekend 1964. It was a big exclusive for Thompson since the Hell's Angels were virulently anti-journalist. He was personally introduced to the Angels in San Francisco. Thompson soon met Ralph "Sonny" Barger, who was leader of the pre-eminent Oakland, California chapter of the Hell's Angels, due to his introduction by a trusted lifetime member. Almost from day one, he was given exclusive access to many of the Hell's Angels' social events and everyday lives. In a letter to Charles Kuralt, then chief West Coast correspondent for CBS News, Thompson calls Birney Jarvis, the member who introduced him, "a golden contact, as it were. Until yesterday Jarvis was the only guy who could talk to the Hell's Angels on anything like human and realistic terms. Today it's me too" (*Proud Highway* 499). This contact gave Thompson the cachet that no other journalist had at the time. He could truthfully report from within the Hell's Angels. Bill Mohr, a photographer and longtime motorcyclist, had the acceptance of the Angels as well. He photographed the Hell's Angels' outings in a fair light, and was later named an honorary Hell's Angel due to his images and tenacity (*Hell's Angels* 132). Thompson's article for *The Nation* ended up being seamlessly woven into his book.

Thompson was enabled to spend personal time with numerous Angels in San Francisco and Oakland. He ended up spending his days and nights, for a little over a year, as a part of their subculture. He drank in their bars and went on their runs. They drank and shared drugs in each other's houses regularly. Thompson was evicted at least once for his association with the Angels. The article "The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders," morphed into a book for a number of reasons. It was easily readable and had matter-of-fact appeal to the general public. Thompson reported from within the midst of his subject about an isolated, almost unknown, yet highly visible group of modern-day outlaws. While others saw the Angels as bogey men of the worst sort, Thompson puts a human face, for good or ill, on the Angels as individuals as well as parts of the group.

3. Subject Makes the Method:

3.1 The Objective Stance

The article was a straight piece of journalism, but with a twist. Rather than parrot the official line generated by the authorities, Thompson chose to analyze and deconstruct the information given to the public via the mainstream press. Through thorough research, and his especially personal experiences with the Angels, Thompson reveals many inconsistencies and exaggerations in official descriptions of the outlaw biker threat. The article centers around an Angels run to Monterey, rape allegations, and a report by Thomas Lynch, then Attorney General of California, that resulted from that run.

Thompson used a three-pronged approach in the article, "The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders," about the Monterey run in 1965. He excoriated the mainstream (national) media for outright exploitation and sensationalism, the California politicians and law enforcement for the same thing, and the Hell's Angels for their habits, lifestyle, and attitudes.

Thompson notes the paradoxical attraction and disgust of the general public toward the Angels. “The unarticulated link between the Hell’s Angels and the millions of losers and outsiders who don’t wear any colors [Hell’s Angels jacket logo]; is the key to their notoriety and the ambivalent reactions they inspire.” There were no clear winners, morally, in his estimation. The Angels went to Monterey where their presence attracted some adventurous, possibly rebellious teenage girls. The girls got more than they bargained for with the Angels. The girls were also under the legal age of consent. This meeting led to rape charges against four of the Angels. Thompson uses a term to describe the media’s reaction to such stories as “a curious rape mania that rides on the shoulder of American journalism like some jeering, masturbating raven. Nothing grabs an editor’s eye like a good rape” (*Hell’s Angels* 13). It was a big story, splashed all over national news magazines and outlets. The Governor of California commissioned then Attorney General Thomas Lynch to report on the rapist thugs who constituted the Hell’s Angels and other reputed outlaw clubs.

Thompson, point-by-point, punches holes in the sensationalized report issued by the Attorney General. His rebuttals are based on solid research and up-to-the moment personal experience with the Oakland Angels. The charges were dismissed shortly afterward, and the Angels were released. The dismissals of the charges went unreported in the national press. “The Deputy District Attorney said ‘a doctor examined the girls and found no evidence to support the charges. Besides that one girl refused to testify’ he explained, ‘and the other was given a lie-detector test and found to be wholly unreliable’” (“Motorcycle Gangs”). The article also delves into the importance and meaning of the Hell’s Angels symbols and the reasons for their insular attitude toward straight society.

The book *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1966) fleshes everything out. We get a long look at the Angels as various characters with a

strong emphasis on their particular lens of the world. They are outliers. They know and acknowledge it. However, what separates them from individual outliers is they band together to seek and maintain a like-minded community. “[T]he Hell’s Angels are obvious losers, and it bugs them. But instead of submitting quietly to their collective fate, they have made it the basis of a full-time social vendetta. They don’t expect to win anything, but on the other hand, they have nothing to lose” (54). Thompson maintains a somewhat objective lens, but since he is spending so much time around these guys, he is also inquisitive and intuitive.

Kevin Kizer describes Thompson’s relationship with the Hell’s Angels this way:

He spent a year with the motorcycle club, not as a writer (they were distrustful of journalists because of their consistent maligning) but almost as a member. His ability as a con man came through for him once again. Thompson became ingrained in the culture and presented the Angels in a fair light, something that had not been done until this time, even though he had once been on the losing end of a severe beating at the hands of the Angels.

Sonny Barger knew that Thompson said some unflattering things about them in the article and book. Yet Barger had a realistic understanding of the general public’s views of the Hell’s Angels and where they stood socially. This understanding is underscored in the book during an exchange between himself and the Sheriff of Bass Lake, where the Angels had gone for a 4th of July run in 1965. The Sheriff attempted to patronize Sonny by saying words to the effect that the Angels were normal, possibly nice people. Sonny’s reply: “Come off it Sheriff, you know we’re all fuck-ups or we wouldn’t be here” (140). Barger knew there was much unpleasantness to be reported about Hell’s Angels’ activities. He seemed to believe that Thompson’s portrayals of them and their activities, while colorful and dramatic, were not sensationalized or fabricated.

Barger felt that sensationalism was always the case with the mainstream press. The article had come out and Barger had read it. In an exchange during that same run, Barger asked Thompson what he was writing now. Thompson replied, "A book." Barger: "Well we don't ask for nothing but the truth. Like I say, there's not much good you can write about us, but I don't see where that gives people the right to just make up stuff . . . all this bullshit, hell, ain't the truth bad enough for 'em?" (143). It was as if Barger wanted their story out there, and Thompson had been even-handed so far by Barger's own account. It is possible that he might have seen Thompson as the lesser of two journalistic evils.

One critic felt that Thompson had sensationalized the Angels at their expense in the article and book. "He wrote about the HAs and while they are still the quintessential outlaw MC (motorcycle club), his version of them is too narrow and too skewed to one side yet it is the one enduring public view of their world. He gave us the brutishness and bravery but not the beauty. He told only the sensationalist part of the story. He told the story that would sell" (Joans). One quote on the opening page of *Hell's Angels* gives a taste of Thompson's penchant for colorful narrative, and foreshadows future gonzo narratives:

The Menace is loose again, the Hell's Angels, the hundred-carat headline, running fast and loud on the early morning freeway, low in the saddle, nobody smiles, jamming crazy through traffic at ninety miles an hour down the center stripe, missing by inches . . . like Genghis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with a fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can and up your daughter's leg with no quarter asked and none given; show the squares some class, give 'em a whiff of those kicks they'll never know. (*Hell's Angels* 3)

Thompson was a journalist. He was keenly aware that editors were looking for sensationalism.

Due to constant police harassment, or heat, as they called it, numerous smaller chapters in California gravitated toward the Oakland chapter because Barger's Angels and the police maintained an uneasy, yet mutual toleration of each other. This migration of refugees led to the Oakland chapter becoming the mother club, or dominant California chapter. Randy McGee believes Thompson's article and book, "situate[s] the Hell's Angels within the broader social, cultural, and political context of the period." McGee contends that this toleration was due to the fact that the Oakland police were more threatened by the potential for black unrest than they were by the Angels. Barger himself reinforced this theory in the book. "They're more scared of the niggers than they are of us, Sonny said, because there's a lot more of them" (*Hell's Angels* 241). McBee, following this line of reasoning, believes the police saw the Angels as potential allies if race riots broke out. Thompson took this theory one step further. He wrote that the Angels and the Oakland cops have what he calls a "psychic compatibility [. . .]. In most cases they operate on the same emotional frequency" (39). He felt that although they were ostensibly enemies, anyone who witnessed an encounter between the Angels and the Oakland cops could easily see a kind of personal kinship there. He does not directly attribute this kinship to the black threat, but does include the observation in a section devoted to the difference in the relationship between the Angels and cops from Oakland and those from other jurisdictions. They play the usual cops-and-robbers routine during encounters on the street. "Yet behind the sound and fury, they are both playing the same game, and usually by the same rules." This can be taken to mean that both sides know the score of what their roles are in society, and follow them without rancor. The idea that the blacks might riot in Oakland could easily be seen as a contributing factor to the psychic compatibility Thompson speaks of. There is that socio-cultural consideration as well as the fact that the Angels are an all-white club.

Another critic contends that Thompson wrote two endings for the book, one prior to his being beaten, and another less flattering version after the beating as a form of resentment and revenge (Kieffner 1). Thompson describes the beating this way: “But within seconds I was clubbed from behind by an Angel I’d been talking to just a moment earlier. Then I was swarmed in a general flail [. . .]. Even when the heavy boots were punching into my ribs and jolting my head back and forth I could hear Tiny somewhere above me saying ‘come on, come on, that’s enough”’ (*Hell’s Angels* 276). That sounds pretty severe.

In William McKeen’s authorized Thompson biography, *Outlaw Journalist: the Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson*, Barger said that the beating wasn’t as bad as Hunter made it appear when he wrote about it in *Hell’s Angels*.

"He had run around with us long enough to know he was going to get beat up, but he wasn’t going to get hurt," Barger said.

“George hit him once.’ We told him ‘that’s enough George’.”

“We picked [Hunter] up and told him, ‘Get out of here.’ ‘He got in his car and drove off’.”

Barger saw it as an intentional, provoked “gimmick” to sell more books.

“The problem I have is that it just isn’t a true story,” Barger said, “but it is a very, very good story.” [. . .].

“He was now able to say,” “I met, I lived with and I was almost killed by the Angels” (111).

These are two very different descriptions as to what really happened in that bar that night. Regardless, there is little doubt that the beating at the end added a menacing flourish to the book.

The fact that he became “ingrained in the culture” in Kizer’s earlier words might be telling. Thompson is most famous for his two Fear and Loathing books, published in 1971 and 1973. Both of these books are a radical departure from the relatively straight reportage of *Hell’s Angels*. It could be argued that his year of exposure to excessive, multi-substance intoxication, which was an Angels’ specialty, led him down the road to the hallucinatory, drug-and-alcohol fueled narratives of the gonzo works that followed.

Thompson refutes the Attorney General’s numbers, compiled from law enforcement agencies throughout California, of Hell’s Angels’ membership. He also compares the Hell’s Angels actual arrest and conviction rates versus the state average. The contrast blatantly favors the Angels, as if that is any consolation to law-abiding citizens. “Meanwhile, according to Attorney General Thomas C. Lynch’s own figures, California’s true crime picture makes the Hell’s Angels look like a gang of Petty Jack rollers” (“Motorcycle Gangs”). The Angels then were still mostly small-time criminals. Thompson was not defending the Angels; he was simply trying to put them in the proper context vis-a-vis the publicity explosion that was currently surrounding them against the backdrop of overall California crime statistics.

This is one of the points at which Thompson’s approach to any event became his and his only. As he insists, “The difference between a Hell’s Angel in the paper and the Hell’s Angels for real is enough to make a man wonder what newsprint is for.” That terminology had been, and would continue to be, one of Thompson’s favorite tropes: “a man doesn’t know what to think etc...” He was able to commune with these totally anti-social outsiders and relate their

experiences as regular people. Written in inimitable wry style, he was blunt and factual.

“California has laws against ‘outraging the public decency,’ but for some reason they are rarely applied to the Hell’s Angels, whose very existence is a mockery of all public decency” (*Hell’s*

Angels 117). The Angels were mostly dangerous to be around for extended periods of time.

Thompson hung around anyway, because he wanted to get and tell the whole unvarnished story regardless of personal risk. There is no question he thinks about the risks, particularly in potentially volatile situations, and mentions them frequently in both pieces.

Sandy, Thompson’s wife at the time, describes his modus operandi when avoiding dangerous situations with the Angels. “Hunter would go to a bar in Oakland, the El Adobe, to see them, but he was very diligent. They would take seconal with beer, and when all of that kicked in, they would be *monsters*. He’d stay until he knew they’d taken the seconal and then he couldn’t leave soon enough” (Wenner and Seymour 81). Although Thompson ostensibly was in the middle of some of the more precarious situations in the book, in reality, his sense of self-preservation usually prevailed.

3.2 Brutish Good Samaritans:

One of Thompson’s earlier critics who accused him of showing only the “brutish” side of the Hell’s Angel’s sees them through rose-colored glasses. In her estimation during that period, ’64-5, the Hell’s Angels were the “quintessential” motorcycle club (Joans). The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for this application, defines “quintessential” as “of, relating to, or of the nature of a quintessence; that is the purest, most typical, or most refined of its kind.” The first question that comes to mind is whether this critic sees the Angels in a romanticized and naïve light, or is somehow unaware of the thuggery that took place almost everywhere Hell’s Angels congregated? They were not sophisticated fulltime criminals then, but they were intimidating

brutes. "Their claim that they 'don't start trouble' is probably true more often than not, but their idea of 'provocation' is dangerously broad, and their problem is that nobody else seems to understand it. Even dealing with them personally, on the friendliest terms, you can sense their hair-trigger readiness to retaliate" ("The Motorcycle Outlaws"). This passage is an example of Thompson's ability to put the reader in the middle of the action, just as he was.

Thompson points out a few positive aspects of the group. He relates a story by a rural garage keeper asked by Angels to let them use his shop to work on their bikes. The guy takes off frightened after assenting and returns to find the Angels had cleaned his tools and his shop (*Hell's Angels* 85-6). There is yet another story about a failed public relations effort to help stranded motorists. They had a card printed up which stated "You Have Been Assisted by a Member of the Frisco Hell's Angels" (178). Unfortunately, every time they pulled over to help a motorist the reaction was one of terror rather than welcome. The motorists rolled up their windows and locked their doors thinking they were going to be assaulted. It is doubtful that one of those cards made it into the hands of a grateful motorist. Regardless, you have to give the Angels credit for trying to be helpful to those in need of their mechanical skills.

3.3 The Sense of Brotherhood:

It is well documented today that a strong sense of brotherhood existed among the Oakland Hell's Angels in those very early days. Most everyone was a hell-raiser and serious member at the same time. The constant threat of violence was one of the Angels' intimidation strategies. Even at that early stage their bylaws stated that in any argument, a Hell's Angel is *always* right (my emphasis) (T. Reynolds 113). "[. . .].Bylaw Number 10 states that when an Angel punches a non-Angel, all other Angels will participate" (*Hell's Angels* 72). Ken Kesey knew what they were about. "I don't think you would ever want to trust an Angel not to attack you [. . .

.] I mean right away, when you're hanging with the Angels, you know who you're hanging with" (149). Thompson rather evenhandedly describes the acts of violence he witnesses. He also knows, from what he has already seen, that the Angels almost look forward to or welcome violence as a departure from their otherwise boring existence.

This is an abbreviated version, by Thompson, of an amalgam of a boring day that turned into a more exciting evening for the Oakland Angels. He describes "[. . .] the familiar beery tedium [. . .] the raucous, repetitive chatter of people who spend so much time together that they can only kill the boredom by getting out of their heads" (*Hell's Angels* 243). Later, at the El Adobe bar which was Angels' territory, four Negroes came in for drinks. One guy was big "He was almost seven feet tall and weighed between 250 and 300" (*Hell's Angels* 243). Bill Mohr, a freelance photographer and friend of the Oakland Angels, had just been made an honorary lifetime member and was drinking at the bar. The big guy sidled up to Mohr, and they started conversing. Mohr, described by Thompson as a "stocky, tough looking man in his thirties" (*Hell's Angels* 132), got into a verbal scrap with the big guy (243).

Mohr invited him outside.

The two squared off in the parking lot [. . .] but by the time the first blows landed, the combat area was enclosed in a ring of spectators [all Angels]. Mohr went after his huge opponent without any preliminaries; he leaped forward and swung at the negro's head—and that was the end of the fight [. . .] He [the black guy] was whacked simultaneously in the stomach, the kidneys, and on all sides of his head [. . .] [The victim went down numerous times but was able to regain his footing, but he could not withstand the onslaught]. When he went down this, [the last], time Sonny grabbed his collar and jerked him onto his back. A boot heel crashed into his mouth. He was helpless

now, his face covered with blood, but the stomping continued. Finally they dragged him outside and dropped him face down in the parking lot. (243-4)

It is interesting to note that this is the only mention in either the article or book of Sonny Barger participating in physical violence. But Sonny was there, and he had to follow the code. No doubt, knowing his history, (he co-wrote the code) he did so enthusiastically. Thompson never noted the significance of that event.

If you read the whole fight scene, it has an almost musical quality, however violent. It is like the “break in” scene from *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick), ultra-violence set to an upbeat happy song. Thompson was a wordsmith; he reportedly agonized over all of his word choices, and their rhythm and syntax.

[. . .] [U]ntil the Angels I had always been writing in the same mold as other newspaper hacks and I thought that was the way to do it. With the Angels however, there was a freedom to use words. I’m a word freak. I like words. I’ve always compared writing to music. That’s the way I feel about good paragraphs. When it really works, it’s like music. In sports writing, you have the freedom to use really aggressive words. There’s a whole breadth of vocabulary. the Angels gave me that same feeling, like hot damn, the thing was rolling right in front of you. You could touch them on their cycles, you could hear them, and you could see the fear and fright in the citizen’s faces. (*Songs of 109*)

Thompson was nothing if not an adrenaline junkie.

3.4 The Outlaw Tag:

The book contains many Thompson gems. He likens the disaffiliated outlaws to the breed of Nelson Algren’s “Linkhorns” and weaves a colorful story about the Linkhorn westward

migration. An interesting digression, if not only for the thinly veiled allusion to outlaws having white trash roots (*Hell's Angels* 157-9). Thompson himself was from lower class, southern roots, which is worth noting. His description of the brawling code of the Angels is priceless in its crisp delivery and straight language.

But a few belong to what the others call 'outlaw clubs,' and these are the ones who—especially on weekends and holidays—are likely to turn up anywhere in the state, looking for action. Despite everything the psychiatrists and Freudian casuists have to say about them, they are tough, mean, and potentially as dangerous as a pack of wild boar. When push comes to shove, any leather fetishes or inadequacy feelings that may be involved are entirely beside the point, as anyone who has tangled with these boys will sadly testify. When you get into an argument with a group of outlaw motorcyclists, you can generally count your chances of emerging unmaimed by the number of heavy-handed allies you can muster in the time it takes to smash a beer bottle. In this league, sportsmanship is for old liberals and young fools. ("Motorcycle Gangs")

This is a shining example of Thompson's talented, involved authorial voice. Consider that he was twenty-seven years old when he wrote this. Also consider this was quoted from the original article, not the later book. So, even before he got to know them personally, he already had a handle on what the Angels were really about.

Thompson has this to say in an attempt to deconstruct and analyze the outlaw biker phenomenon.

The concept of the 'motorcycle outlaw' was as uniquely American as jazz. Nothing like them had ever existed. In some ways they appeared to be a kind of half-breed anachronism, a human hangover from the era of the Wild West. Yet in other ways they

were as new as television. There was absolutely no precedent, in the years after World War II, for large gangs of hoodlums on motorcycles, reveling in violence, worshipping mobility and thinking nothing of riding five hundred miles on a weekend . . . to whoop it up with other gangs of cyclists in some country hamlet entirely unprepared to handle even a dozen peaceful tourists. (*Hell's Angels* 68)

In the beginning at least, many of these groups were harmless toward average citizens unless they construed they were being provoked by them.

The term motorcycle “outlaw” was derived from an unattributable quote, reportedly from a member of the American Motorcycle Association. The quote said words to the effect that ninety-nine percent of American motorcyclists (particularly A.M.A. members) are law abiding citizens. The bad guys (outlaws) only made up one percent of the motorcycling public. The Hell’s Angels and other clubs quickly took up this term. They responded by having patches made to adorn their colors (patched club jackets) with the new designation of “outlaw.”

George Wethern, a former officer of the Oakland chapter, describes how the designation led to a sense of solidarity between the Angels and other outlaw clubs.

“The Angels and our friends decided to exploit the glowing tribute. We voted to ally under a ‘one percenter’ patch. [. . .]. [I]t would identify the wearer as a righteous outlaw. [. . .]. Everyone knew the patch was a deliberately provocative gesture, but we wanted to draw deep lines between ourselves and the pretenders and weekenders who only played with motorcycles” (Wethern 37).

Ironically, the out-and-out insult became an unwitting rallying cry for the outlaws.

Somewhere along the line Thompson acquired the label of “outlaw Journalist.”

According to him, he first became an outlaw writing about communing with the Hell’s Angels. “I was never trying, necessarily, to be an outlaw. It was just the place in which I found myself. By the time I started writing Hell’s Angels I was riding with them and it was clear that it was no longer possible for me to go back and live within the law” (*Conversations With* 150). Thompson gave his unique take on what it means to be an outlaw. “If I like something, and it happens to be outside the law, well, then I might have a problem. But an outlaw can be defined as somebody who lives outside the law, beyond the law, not necessarily against” (149). Thompson reveled in making his own set of rules, almost all of which were against the law. It is amazing that he got away with as much as he did.

3.5 The Necessity of Otherness:

Thompson, consistently and prudently tried to maintain his sense of otherness while with the group. Thompson’s ego and sense of intellectual superiority over the bikers was evident simply because he considered himself a serious and worldly writer. The Angels were the subjects of a project, nothing more, nothing less. Sonny Barger recalls his engagement with Thompson. “He was definitely different. He didn’t fit in. [. . .]. He always knew that he was apart from us. Some people get into thinking they’re one of us, and they can really run into problems. I don’t think he ever tried to put that front on. Which is a very good thing for him—and for us too” (Wenner and Seymour 80). The Angels were clannish, secretive, and dangerously disliked any non-Angels. “What do you mean by that word ‘right’? The only thing we’re concerned about is what’s right for us. We got our own definition of ‘right’” (*Hell’s Angels* 113). It was prudent for any regular citizen to keep their distance from any outlaw bikers.

4. Different Types of Counter-Culture:

The counter-culture was on the rise in the mid-sixties. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines counter-culture as “A radical culture, esp. amongst the young, that rejects established social values and practices; a mode of life opposed to the conventional or dominant.” There were so many anti-authority social movements going on it was hard to keep track of them. It is fair to say that the anti-Vietnam war movement dominated them all. By an odd coincidence, the Angels were introduced to Ken Kesey, a then icon of the counter-culture. Kesey invited them to his ranch in La Honda California where they mixed with luminaries and hipsters from the counter-culture. Kesey also introduced the Angels to LSD, which was then still legal.

Thompson had concerns about the Angels mixing with the peace and love crowd, and LSD. “There was little optimism about what might happen when the Angels—worshipping violence, rape and swastikas—found themselves in a crowd of intellectual hipsters, Marxist radicals, and pacifist peace marchers” (*Hell’s Angels* 236-7). The Angels became peaceful on LSD during the first weekend at La Honda, and took to the drug in a big way. Unlike the counter-culture types, who took LSD for consciousness expansion, the Angels treated it like any other drug they were wont to use. John Wood, in “Hell’s Angels and the Illusion of the Counterculture” puts it this way; “However despite their affection for the drug the Hell’s Angels did not take LSD for the same reasons as the Merry Pranksters and the rest of the counterculture. Instead of seeking mystical experiences through LSD, the Angels took the drug for the same reason they took any drug: to render themselves senseless” (346). The counter-culture liberals overestimated the Angel’s level of commitment to anything other than personal entertainment.

The Anti-war people held this fanciful vision of the Hell's Angels as brothers-in-arms as it were, due to their peaceful attendance at Kesey's parties and their anti-authority stance.

Thompson on the other hand, saw these parties through the true eyes of the Angels when he speaks about liberals asking him to arrange for the Angels to attend yet another party. "The setting was guaranteed trouble: heaping tubs of beer, wild music and several dozen young girls looking for excitement while their husbands and varied escorts wanted to talk about 'alienation' and 'a generation in revolt.' Even a half dozen Angels would have quickly reduced the scene to an intolerable common denominator: Who will get fucked" (*Hell's Angels* 230)? It did not take long for the counter-culture to realize the true nature of the Hell's Angels.

The first shock came when the Angels attacked a peace march at the Oakland/Berkeley line in front of many police officers (248).

The Hell's Angels, like all other motorcycle outlaws are rigidly anti-Communist. Their political views are limited to the same kind of retrograde patriotism that motivates the John Birch Society, the Ku Klux Klan, and the American Nazi Party. They are blind to the irony of their role . . . knight errants of a faith from which they have already been excommunicated.

The Angels merely exploited Kesey's parties for the free dope, alcohol, food, and women. They could not have cared less about anyone's political philosophies other than their own.

Thompson believed the Hell's Angels attack on the peace marchers was a tipping point for the counterculture.

The Angels blew it in 1965 at the Oakland-Berkeley line, [. . .]. This proved to be an historic schism in the Rising Tide of the Youth Movement of the Sixties. It was the first open break between the Greasers and the Longhairs, and the importance of that break

can be read in the history of SDS, [Students for a Democratic Society, a left-wing anti-war movement of the period], which eventually destroyed itself in the doomed effort to reconcile the interests of the lower/working class biker/dropout types and the upper/middle, Berkeley/ student activists (*Las Vegas* 179).

Thompson believed that had these disparate groups successfully united, they would have created a much greater force against the government than either could be alone.

The Hell's Angels went on to exploit LSD for their own benefit by capturing and controlling the LSD market in the Bay area. "It is apparent that the Angels meetings with Kesey's Pranksters enlightened the Angels to the potential money to be made from the drug trade, rather than to the mind-opening aspects of the drugs themselves (Wood 347). George Wethern, a former Angel, said "while a few members would generally sympathize with the hippie movement, the majority would exploit it" (Wethern and Colnett 87-91). The final blow against the counterculture by the Angels came at Altamont in 1969.

Altamont was a huge free concert headlined by the Rolling Stones at a race track outside the city. There is some debate and even evasion as to who was responsible for the Angels being brought in as security, because their presence resulted in much violence and the stabbing death of a concertgoer. *Rolling Stone* magazine, in a retrospective, put it this way speaking with a concertgoer: "The Hell's Angels had a lot to do with it. The people that were working with us getting the concert together thought it would be a good idea to have them as a security force. But I got the impression that because they were a security force they were using it as an excuse. They're just very, very violent people" (14). Here are two views: Thompson: "That was way over the line. I've seen stuff like that before. Not kill people in that sense, but I wasn't surprised at all at the

Angel's behavior. That's what they do" (Bulger). Sonny Barger: They say that was the end of the Age of Aquarius, but actually to us it's just another day in the life of a Hell's Angel. A guy pulled a gun on us, he got killed and that's the bottom line" (DeRienzo). There are numerous contradictory versions of why the Angels were there. "The orgy of violence at Altamont merely *dramatized* the problem. The realities were already fixed; the illness was understood to be terminal, and the energies of the movement were long since aggressively dissipated by the rush to self-preservation" (*Las Vegas* 180). The event itself was a symbolic death knell for the hopefulness that had characterized the early and mid-sixties.

Thompson ended up identifying with the Angels more than he originally intended to. "By the middle of summer I had become so involved in the outlaw scene that I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels, or slowly being absorbed by them. [. . .] In the beginning I kept them out of my own world, but after several months my friends grew accustomed to finding Hell's Angels in my apartment at any hour of the day or night" (*Hell's Angels* 48). These experiences speak to the potential liabilities of Thompson's technique of total immersion. He was walking a fine line that was not required of him. James Silberman, editor in chief of Random house books in 1965, comments in correspondence with Thompson. "Hunter, I know how you do your research. You tie yourself to a set of railroad tracks and wait for the train. That's what happened at the end of Hell's Angels (Thompson was beat up by them). He was on the tracks the whole time he was writing the book" (Wenner and Seymour 86). However, Thompson's involvement authenticated his writing. He could not do it differently.

5. Thompson as Social Critic and “Outlaw”:

It goes back to his willingness to be on the scene as a candid social critic, even if his opinions were unpopular at the time, and situations became perilous and maybe illegal. Another friend who was reading the galleys for *Hell's Angels* berated him for his approach. “These guys are crazies and you’re glorifying them. [. . .]. In essence you’re kind of glorifying them in this book. [. . .] I had a different idea of how he should be writing it than he did, and I was absolutely wrong.” But he said, “‘No, these guys are really showing us where society is going’.” “And I totally missed it, because he was absolutely right” (82-3). Thompson saw the Angels, as mentioned previously, as microcosms of the society that spawned them, and what they represented, (outright loathing for the status quo), was growing bigger all the time.

The article and book were social statements. Thompson in a later interview stated, “The book was controlled, even ‘sociological’” (Lombardi).

“The outlaw stance is patently anti-social, although most Angels, as individuals, are naturally social creatures. The contradiction is deep-rooted, and has parallels on every level of American society. Sociologists call it ‘alienation’ or ‘anomie’. It is a sense of being cut off, or left out of whatever society one was presumably meant to be a part of.[. . .]. But in a society with no central motivation, so far adrift and puzzled with itself that the President feels called upon to appoint a Committee of National Goals, a sense of alienation is likely to be very popular—especially among people young enough to shrug off the guilt they’re supposed to feel for deviating from a goal or purpose they never understood in the first place. [. . .]. The Hell’s Angels are not visionaries, but diehards, and if they are the forerunners or the vanguard of anything, it is not the ‘moral revolution’ in vogue on college campuses, but a fast-growing legion of young

unemployables whose untapped energy will inevitably find the same kind of destructive outlet that 'outlaws' like the Hell's Angels have been finding for years. (*Hell's Angels* 260)

Besides being a prescient piece of writing, this mini-manifesto is a classic example of Thompson interjecting his personal philosophy and vision into a so-called straight journalistic piece. This technique is repeatedly cited as a central element of "New Journalism."

Thompson identified with the Angels on more than one level "Hunter spoke about the Hell's Angels in a strange kind of way. There was an identification with the Angels as outcasts—downtrodden outcasts, and victims, if you will. He saw them as a kind of emblem of honor and rebellion" (Wenner and Seymour 79). He admired their cohesiveness and loyalty. He admired how a graceless unsocialized slob would become a literal figure of grace once he mounted and rode his Harley. He admired their lack of fear on the dangerous California Highways. "I've got a lot in common with the Hell's Angels [. . .]. The main difference is I've got a gimmick—I can write" (*Conversations With* 53). He also admired their "f...k you" attitudes and willingness to fight anyone who crossed them or was perceived to.

Thompson must have thought he was hitting the proverbial nail of society right on the head. "Thompson sees the Angels as contemporary folk heroes whose romantic delinquency has a vast appeal in a nation of frightened dullards. They are a 'success' because, in an age when truly colorful outlaws are in short supply, a large element of the population wants them to exist" (Hogan). The National mainstream media exposure made them look like modern-day John Dillingers, and, ironically, caused them to become deluged with potential recruits and helped their expansion inside and outside of California.

Thompson's attitude might be traced to his many troubles with the law as a youth. He saw the inequality of a criminal justice system that favored the rich friends who had been jailed with him on one occasion, and who were released on bail almost immediately while he languished in jail unable to make bail. He got an insider's view of how our system worked. Money spoke louder than words. Morality or equality were not even parts of the equation in 1960s America. Neither are they today. It is not surprising that he empathized with the classes who had no real voice in the system.

The caustic, self-centered, no-holds-barred lifestyle for which Thompson is infamous originated with his own contempt for his journalistic peers' misrepresentation.

Thompson actually dove into the deep end to find out what life looked like from the bottom up, a method that became a trademark of his work to come and a common denominator of the school of New Journalism. (*Conversations With* 52)

Thompson had no patience for what he called journalistic "hacks" who filled the ranks of mainstream journalism. They simply repeated what they heard from various sources while sitting at a desk in a building far removed from the action.

6. The "New Journalism" as Literature:

Thompson became identified as a practitioner of the New Journalism. His work and style are considered to be part of the New Journalism literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to break free from the purely objective style of mainstream reportage of the time. "Thompson almost always wrote in the first person, while extensively using his own experiences and emotions to color "the story" he was trying to follow. His writing aimed to be humorous, colorful, and bizarre, and he often exaggerated events to be more entertaining"

(Brinkley and McDonald). Thompson began developing a unique style that, almost in spite of itself, consequently fell under the aegis of New Journalism.

So what constitutes "the new journalism?"

The nonfiction novel and the new journalism are significant for three main reasons: (1) they reflect changes in the style and form of traditional journalism; (2) nonfiction novels demonstrate a changing relationship between the writer's conception of his role and the production of art in a mass society; and (3) the writer's choice of documentary forms rather than imaginative fiction raises important questions about the direction of writing in America. (Hollowell x)

It comes down to an acceptance by the literary cognoscenti of new journalism as literature. John Hellman puts it this way. 'The new journalism is, in my view, most properly understood as a genre of literature. Like realistic fiction or romantic fiction [. . .] it has an aesthetic form and purpose making its final direction inward.' He uses a definition of fiction used by another author as "a work of art in prose."

According to Hellman, following that definition, it is logical to call new journalism fiction (24). This is paradoxical, because most of the examples of new journalism that follow appear to be a combination of fiction and straight reportage. This could be described as nonfiction with embellishments. The new journalism can most accurately be described as literary experiments with form, style, language, and content.

“ The genre has long been associated with postmodernism, as its practitioners self-consciously collapse distinctions between participant and observer, between historical and personal narratives, and between modern journalism, supposition of objectivity and the subject/reporter that such journalism seeks to conceal or deny” (Vredenburg 159). Considering

the social turbulence and new ways of thinking coming into being in the 1960s, it was a style that was ideal for its time. It was also a style that was widely embraced by the reading public if new journalism sales were any indication. Wolfe, Mailer, Capote, and others became wealthy due to the popularity of their works.

Tom Wolfe, in his anthology *The New Journalism* (1973), describes the genesis of new journalism this way: "It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, [to novelists], you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would... read *like* a novel. Like a novel, if you get the picture" (22) Norman Mailer titled his book *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (1968). His book is a mix of combined narrative insights in the first and third person, as he participates in an anti-Vietnam War protest and the aftermath. Another regularly cited example of new journalism is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), which chronicles two criminals who murdered a family in Kansas. George Plimpton's *Paper Lion* (1968) is cited as another. In it he participates in a professional football game. Wolfe himself wrote *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), in which he appears to be a participant in a coast -to- coast LSD promotional tour by Novelist Ken Kesey and a hastily established group calling themselves "The Merry Pranksters." Last, but certainly not least, is Hunter S. Thompson's *The Hell's Angels* (1966), a chronicle of over a year of communing with the outlaw motorcycle club.

Bill Reynolds, in "On the Road to Gonzo: Hunter S. Thompson's Early Literary Journalism", offers this perception: "[j]ournalists who wrote in a distinctive personal voice wanted to be free to tell stories as they saw them, without being shackled by institutional conventions of objectivity. They thought that personal involvement and immersion were indispensable to an authentic, full-blooded account of experience" (26). That is Reynolds'

opinion. Not all of the lauded new journalists practiced immersion in constructing or writing their books.

According to W. G. Nicholson, and elaborated on by Wolfe, the new journalists utilized four literary devices. Scene-by scene construction, recording dialogue in full, third-person point of view, and the meticulous recording of detail (56). Wolfe elaborates. " 'Telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative" (New Journalism 46). In other words, telling it as you see and hear it.

"[R]ealistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device." It makes you feel as if you are on the scene, or in the scene. More complicated is the "third person point of view." [T]he technique of presenting every scene through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind, and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it." (Wright)

Thompson often brought readers further into his mind than many writers find necessary or possible.

7. Immersion as the Distinctive Basis of Thompson's Writing:

The difference between Thompson and the others cited, with the exceptions of Plimpton and possibly Mailer, was that Thompson physically immersed himself in his subjects. He always reported from the midst of the action, others reconstructed through research after the fact. William McKeen makes this observation regarding Thompson's technique and style.

For the first six months he worked on the book, Hunter was the methodical reporter, gathering information, writing an anthropological study of the Angels along the lines of

Eleanor Smith Bowen's, [nom de plume for published 1960s anthropologist Laura Bohannan] observations of the tribes of northern Nigeria. [. . .] Unlike the other big books of the sixties, such as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid test*, which Tom Wolfe wrote in a cabin in Virginia, Hunter's *Hell's Angels* was the only book lived and primarily composed in the belly of the counterculture, smack dab in the middle of the social revolution at the corner of Haight and Ashbury (108-9).

His work was diligent, well researched, and while somewhat personally biased, provided the reader with in-depth glimpses of a previously unnoticed paradoxical American phenomenon. The two central criteria for pieces deemed new journalism is whether they qualify as novels rather than simply pieces of reportage; and whether new journalism pieces constitute fiction or non-fiction? It is hard to call Thompson's book *Hell's Angels* a "novel" in an imaginative sense or a work of non-fiction. Thus, it does fit the criteria for New Journalism exactly. It is a hybrid, and this hybrid is not commonly accepted as literature by literary scholars.

8. Gonzo Journalism as Literature:

In Thompson's hands, "New Journalism" became "Gonzo Journalism," a term attributed only to Thompson and his style. Gonzo defies strict definition so here are a few examples. "Designating a type of committed, subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetorical style" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). "As the chief and only true gonzo, Thompson, in his famous 'Fear and Loathing' reportage for Rolling Stone magazine, wasn't just a passive observer but played his own freaked-out part as unofficial Tom O' Bedlam to the events he covered" (*Newsweek* 12 May 93/1 via the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Gonzo Journalism is a style of reporting in which the journalist is far more than a

detached observer of the events being recorded. It rejects objectivity in favor of vivid depictions of events experienced, subjectively, by the reporter. The Gonzo Journalist is part of the story, by coincidence, or a conscious choice to participate in shaping the events and outcome. Fictional elements sometimes co-exist with non-fictional elements in Gonzo Journalism. Gonzo Journalism, and the underlying concept of "Gonzo," have become part of our modern lexicon. "Gonzo" has come to mean that the creator is not absent from their creation. Because it adds value for the audience, the creator's role in the story is highlighted rather than marginalized. (Gates).

The definition depends on each critic's perception. Hence, a scholar finds there is no canonical category for gonzo. As with New Journalism above, gonzo is a hybrid. To one who is a linear thinker who needs a categorical label for gonzo, it can be called a sub-genre of New Journalism.

8.1 "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved":

Considered a seminal example of early Gonzo, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" drew positive attention from critics. It was Thompson's first collaboration with British illustrator Ralph Steadman. Steadman gives a colorful account of Thompson's "consummate skill" driving a large convertible at high speed while juggling a cigarette, a beer on the seat next to him, and a tumbler of whiskey and ice between his legs (Steadman 14). They had met for the first time just a few hours earlier. In one of Thompson's early exchanges with Steadman, he advises: "'Just pretend you're visiting a huge outdoor loony bin,' I said. 'If the inmates get out of control we'll soak them down with Mace.' I showed him the can of 'Chemical Billy'."

Thompson's focus was on the people rather than the race itself. "And unlike most of the others in the press box, we didn't give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the real beasts perform." One critic ascribes Thompson's outlook and motives in

writing the piece to a personal revisiting of a place where he had been shunned as a child. “But of course. The Derby story was not about the Derby. It was a near spontaneous yet tailor-made journey homeward for Thompson, back to a town whose authorities had arrested him on a rape allegation, among other charges, ten years previous and railroaded him into military duty” (Reynolds 53). Nevertheless, it turned out to be a breakthrough article.

The Derby story introduces several elements that would become characteristic of Thompson’s Gonzo journalism: the presence of a first-person, autobiographical narrator who assumes the role of protagonist; the participation of a male bonding figure, in this case illustrator Ralph Steadman, who, like Oscar Zeta-Acosta would later do in *Las Vegas*, plays the role of the comic foil; the change of focus from the ostensible subject, the Derby itself to Thompson’s failed return to his hometown, Louisville, Kentucky, to face his personal demons; and, finally, Thompson’s agonized struggle to produce a finished article by the deadline. (Mosser 86)

Thompson thought the article would not be successful. “[. . .] at the time I thought I was finished as a writer [. . .]. But then just days after it came out, I began to get calls and letters from all over the country saying what a fantastic breakthrough format in journalism” (*Songs of 137*). He considered the piece a combination of “accident and desperation.” “I thought ‘Holy shit, if I can write like this and get away with it, why should I keep trying to write like the New York Times? It was like falling down an elevator shaft and landing in a pool full of mermaids’” (McKeen 151). Although his success was surprising to him, other writers, and critics recognized the talent inherent in Thompson’s writing.

Praising the article, Tom Wolfe celebrated Hunter’s “manic, highly adrenal first-person style.” Putting the writer center stage was not always a good idea, Wolfe said, but it

worked because Hunter usually casts himself as a “frantic loser, inept and half-psychotic, somewhat after the manner of Celine” and because much of the Derby description comes “in the form of Celine-like fantasies he presents to the artist, Ralph Steadman, in conversation.” (149)

Steadman, in turn, produced artwork in a uniquely fantastic vision that seemed to correspond with Hunter’s words. Theirs was a love/hate relationship that lasted over 30 years.

There are some notable elements in “Kentucky Derby” which Thompson replicated in the *Fear and Loathing* books. After seeking an illustrator, Pat Oliphant, who was unavailable, an editor friend recommended Welsh born Ralph Steadman. Steadman served two purposes in this and several future pieces. He was both recorder and foil for Thompson. In his memoir, Steadman gives his first impression of his new friend and collaborator for over thirty years. “In a way I hit the bulls eye with that very first assignment, getting Hunter; it resulted in 35 years of association with this extraordinary guy.” (Wise). Thompson portrays himself as a paranoid who always feels someone is after him. He is brutal in his descriptions of people, (in this case a big crowd), and does not hesitate to spew bile on upper and lower class alike. He also tells a hair-raising story to a straight-arrow type visitor, scares the daylights out of him, and promptly walks off.

I shook my head and said nothing; just stared at him for a moment, trying to look grim.

“There’s going to be trouble,” I said. “My assignment is to take pictures of the riot.”

“What riot?”

I hesitated, twirling the ice in my drink. “At the track. On Derby Day. The Black Panthers.” I stared at him again. “Don’t you read the newspapers?”

The grin on his face had collapsed.

“What the hell are you talkin about?”

“Well ... maybe I shouldn’t be telling you ...” I shrugged. “But hell, everybody seems to know. The cops and the National Guard have been getting ready for six weeks. They have 20,000 troops on alert at Fort Knox. They warned us — all the press and photographers — to wear helmets and special vests like flak jackets. We were told to expect shooting . . .”

“No!” he shouted; his hands flew up and hovered momentarily between us, as if to ward off the words he was hearing. Then he hacked his fist on the bar. “Those sons of bitches! God Almighty! The Kentucky Derby!” He kept shaking his head. “No! Jesus! That’s almost too bad to believe!” Now he seemed to be jaggng on the stool, and when he looked up his eyes were misty. “Why? Why here? Don’t they respect anything?”

Contriving total fabrications on the spot just to mine the depths of his victim’s lack of awareness was a favorite technique for Thompson, and almost always proved to be illuminating and hilarious at the same time. He did the same thing to an unwitting maid (180-84) and a visiting District attorney (146) in *Las Vegas*.

The combination of invective, cynicism, intoxication, and a keen reporter’s eye proved very successful for Thompson in describing his take on the Kentucky Derby.

Now, looking down from the press box, I pointed to the huge grassy meadow enclosed by the track. “That whole thing,” I said, “will be jammed with people; fifty thousand or so, and most of them staggering drunk. It’s a fantastic scene — thousands of people fainting, crying, copulating, trampling each other and fighting with broken whiskey

bottles.[. . .]. So the face I was trying to find in Churchill Downs that weekend was a symbol, in my own mind, of the whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is. (“Kentucky Derby”)

Thompson emphasized the decadence of the Kentucky Derby, and whatever he was trying to get across, there was always a moral and cultural element to his writing.

Steadman becomes the stooge because he creates such grotesque images that Thompson thinks Steadman represents a danger in Louisville culture. “Another problem was his habit of sketching people he met in the various social situations I dragged him into, then giving them the sketches. The results were always unfortunate. I warned him several times about letting the subjects see his foul renderings, but for some perverse reason he kept doing it” (“Kentucky Derby”). This is an excellent example of digression and moving off the subject on Thompson’s part.

Thompson denigrates upper-class locals. “Pink faces with stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and buttndown collars. “ Mayblossom Senility” (Steadman’s phrase) ... burnt out early or maybe just not much to burn in the first place. Not much energy in these faces, not much *curiosity*.” They may as well have been zombies in his estimation. But Steadman proved to be an astute observer. “I left Steadman sketching in the Paddock bar and sent off to place our bets on the sixth race. When I came back he was staring intently at a group of young men around a stable not far away. ‘Jesus, look at the corruption in that face!’ he whispered. ‘Look at the madness, the fear, the greed.’” Steadman’s goal was to capture the perverted, corrupted vision that Thompson was looking for, the real face of the Kentucky Derby. He finally finds that face in himself and Thompson, ragged after three days of total intoxication and anti-social behavior. “You know — I’ve been thinking about that,” he said. “We came down here to

see this terrible scene: people all pissed out of their minds and vomiting on themselves and all that ... and now, you know what? It's us ...”

Steadman had come to a realization that Thompson would not, or could not, recognize.

Nevertheless, due to time and place (60s America), Thompson found he had a readymade readership set against the following backdrop;

During 1964 the civil-rights movement reached its apotheosis but also began to fracture, as radical elements demanded more than the political system was willing to give. Urban race riots shook the nation. The United States commitment in Vietnam escalated, as President Johnson Americanized what had begun as a Vietnamese civil war. Not only had McCarthyism lost its power to intimidate, it had inspired a powerful leftist political backlash. On some college campuses, a more radical political culture blossomed. Among adventurous and sophisticated young people, drug use began to spread. And as the first wave of baby-boomers went off to colleges and universities, women were granted more social freedom, while the wide-spread availability of birth control pills eased inhibitions against premarital sex. (Lytle 143)

The culture was changing rapidly and the reading public was ripe for a new kind of criticism like Thompson's.

“Kentucky Derby” was written for *Scanlan's*, but Thompson soon jumped over to *Rolling Stone*, in which *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was originally published in two parts. *Rolling Stone* originated as a music magazine, which developed a huge audience among the young and counter-culture types of the time. Thompson was a writer who was unafraid to scathingly mock the establishment, and Jann Wenner, the owner and publisher of *Rolling Stone*, gave him free rein to write whatever he wanted or felt he needed to say. It turned out to be positive for both

of them. Thompson was fortunate enough, in that time and place, to be preaching to the choir in terms of readership. His readers believed what he believed, and reveled in his scathing depictions of authority figures and, later, politicians and their ilk. “Thompson didn’t need a college education to realize that if he wanted to write articles and books that appealed to the masses, then it wasn’t necessarily a bad idea to drink excessively, drug indulgently, shout abusively, *and write*” (Whitmer 86). It is around this time that Thompson’s public persona began to clash with his aspirations to be regarded as a serious novelist.

8.2 *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas was an exercise in illegal extremes. It should be noted that, because of advances in technology, no one today could get away with all the credit card and check defrauding Thompson, believably, carried out from the late ‘60s to the mid- ‘70s. Thompson brings his sidekick for this adventure, a three-hundred-pound Samoan attorney (based on Oscar Zeta-Acosta), along for the assignment. Both of them are pill-popping, magnum-packing, free in society, sociopaths, but not homicidal. They were just wanting to control their environment.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, they work precisely to resist that [perceived] imperfect peace based on a desire for security rather than for progress and justice. Not content merely to survive, not willing to surrender to security, Duke and Dr. Gonzo use drugs to exert force on the world of Las Vegas; rejecting the approach to drugs as a transcendent experience, in their frenzied, drug-fueled behavior they seek to productively destruct the established order. (Vredenburg 11)

They felt that any level of skullduggery was legitimate to achieve that end.

The sidekick as someone to bounce his thoughts off, to create fictional dialogue, or as a comic foil, whichever was more convenient, was one of Thompson's favorite devices. "I learned at the Kentucky Derby that it was extremely useful to have a straight man with me, someone to bounce reactions off of. I was fascinated by Ralph Steadman because he was so horrified by most of what he saw in this country. Ugly cops and cowboys and things he'd never seen in England. I used that in the Derby piece and then I began to see it was an extremely valuable device" (Brinkley and McDonnell). Raoul Duke, a fictional persona who plays various parts in the *Fear and Loathing* books, actually first appears in *Hell's Angels* as part of a Thompson-generated list of notorious American outlaws (263). Oscar Zeta-Acosta, a Mexican-American activist and actual attorney, became Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Ralph Steadman plays the sidekick role in several Thompson pieces, beginning with "Kentucky Derby."

Two other devices Thompson utilized frequently are digression and stream-of-consciousness. Norman Mailer, in *Armies of the Night* describes digression this way. "One of the oldest devices of the novelist [. . .] is to bring his narrative [. . .] to a pitch of excitement where the reader, no matter how cultivated is reduced to a beast who can pant no faster than to ask, 'And then what?' 'Then what happens?' At which point the novelist, consummate cruel lover, introduces a digression, aware that delay at this point helps to deepen the addiction of his audience" (151). Literary digression is defined by the *AP English Glossary* as "A literary device in which the author creates a temporary departure from the main subject or narrative in order to focus on a related matter." Thompson used digression constantly. For example, in *Hell's Angels* he used it to flesh out numerous characters after introducing them, usually in the midst of some wild or raucous action going on.

Another critic describes Thompson's technique this way:

Gonzo writing is quite similar to stream-of-consciousness. Thoughts and descriptions flow together, moving rapidly from one subject to another, direction often determined by word association. The free flow allows for constant digression [. . .]. Digression sets up another stream-of-consciousness device, suspended coherence. Something is mentioned, abandoned, then picked up at a later point, if at all. Just as stream-of-consciousness is employed to break down the divisions of time, digression allows Thompson to introduce the past or the future at any point [. . .]. The imaginary digressions allow Thompson to invent some of his most violent or insane passages. (Novoa 41)

The violence and insanity came through loud and clear.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas begins with a famous opening drug reference. "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold" (3). From that point on things get hallucinatory, and the narrative shifts back and forth between moments of clarity and hallucination. In both books Thompson consumes vast amounts of liquor and drugs, and takes potshots at any and all authority figures. His style became what is known as "Gonzo Journalism", a term coined by Bill Cardozo, then editor of the *Sunday Boston Globe* (Reynolds 52). Kevin Kizer describes his style: "What made these works so special is not so much the subject matter, but the way in which Thompson wrote. His form was wild and breathless, catching action as it was happening, cutting through the bullshit, fictionalizing here and there, and making sense of it all later." One could not write a more accurate description of Thompson's writing than that. "According to Thompson, Gonzo Journalism is a camera eye technique of reporting in which the writer's notes are published supposedly without editing" (Novoa 39). This is only partially true according to his biographer: "He [Thompson] admitted that he hadn't done

a second draft of anything since *Fear and Loathing*” (McKeen 224.) One can only presume that everything he wrote prior was edited.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is ostensibly about Thompson being assigned to cover a motorcycle race and a District Attorney’ conference in Las Vegas, but it became more than that. Like The Kentucky Derby piece, the story ends up being about searching for the American Dream in the commercialized wasteland of Las Vegas. “Let me explain it to you, [Thompson speaking to a waitress in a rundown diner] let me explain it just briefly if I can. We’re looking for the American Dream and we were told it was somewhere in this area. [. . .] That’s why they gave us this white Cadillac; they figure that we could catch up with it in that . . .” (164). They end up being directed to a burned down old club on “Paradise Blvd.” The symbolism and irony is inescapable.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas gained much popularity among younger readers because Thompson spoke to them in their own language. He showed that he had his finger on the pulse of drug trends in the U.S. while showing the ineptitude and lack of knowledge displayed by law enforcement as represented by the attendees of the District Attorney’s conference. “They are still burning taxpayers for thousands of dollars to make films about ‘the dangers of LSD’ at a time when acid is widely known to be the Studebaker of the drug market. [. . .] The big market these days is in Downers. Reds and smack—Seconol and heroin [. . .] ‘Consciousness expansion’ went out with LBJ . . . and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon” (201-2). Thompson was not only well aware of what was happening on the street, but he also tied drug trends to the darkening political future represented by Richard Nixon.

Jason Vredenburg interprets the novel as a representation of the passage of America from modernity to empire. “I then explain, with Hardt’s and Negri’s help, how the novel reveals insight into the passage from modernity into empire. This reading of the novel both clarifies the history of these more recently theorized concepts and reveals new significance in Thompson’s most famous work as a first draft of that history” (2). Vredenburg’s theory is that America is moving toward a “state of exception” where the government can suspend laws at will based on anything or anyone it deems threatening. Las Vegas is the perfect example of a place where the law is strictly applied to some, and mostly ignored when it comes to the rich or moneyed. “Among the central conceits of the novel is the representation of Las Vegas, with its repression of the drug culture and associated weirdness, its invitation to excess, and its overwhelming interest in commerce and the flow of capital, as a stand-in for America as a whole” (6). Thompson follows this up with his summation of Vegas in his words. “This is one of the hallmarks of Vegas hospitality. The only bedrock rule is Don’t Burn the Locals. Beyond that, nobody cares. They would rather not know. If Charlie Manson checked into the Sahara tomorrow morning, nobody would hassle him as long as he tipped big” (*Las Vegas* 106). Such was his view of Las Vegas at the time.

Thompson elaborates on the blatant greed and corruption personified by Vegas. “Not for me. No mercy for a criminal freak in Las Vegas. This place is like the Army: the shark ethic prevails—eat the wounded. In a closed society where everybody’s guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity” (72). This attitude is in stark contrast to the hopes with which he started the trip. “But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country—but only for those with true

grit. And we were chock full of that" (18). In retrospect, his attitude seems naïve and overly idealistic. After all, Las Vegas was built with the sole purpose of taking people's money.

Thompson reveled in attending a District Attorney's drug conference while stoned out of his mind on various substances.

We were the menace—not in disguise, but stone obvious drug abusers, with a flagrantly cranked-up act that we intended to push all the way to the limit . . . not to prove any sociological point, and not even as conscious mockery: It was mainly a matter of life-style, a sense of obligation and even duty. If the pigs were gathering in Vegas for a top-level drug conference, we felt the drug culture should be represented. (110)

Thompson had an anarchic bent which his readers loved. What person in their right mind would enter a room full of law enforcement bigwigs under those conditions?

Before they found the burnt-out club on Paradise Blvd, Thompson thought he had stumbled upon the Dream.

"You Found the American Dream?" He said. "In this town?"

"I nodded. ' We're sitting on the main nerve right now,'" I said. "You remember that story the manager told us about the owner of this place? How he always wanted to run away and join the circus as a kid?"

Bruce ordered two more beers. He looked over the casino for a moment, then shrugged.

"Yeah, I see what you mean," he said.

"Now the bastard has his own circus, and a license to steal, too."

He nodded. "You're right—he's the model."

“Absolutely,” I said. ‘It’s pure Horatio Alger, all the way down to his attitude.’ (190)

Thompson’s fondest lament, starting with the motorcycle stories, was that the Horatio Alger story was no longer a reality for the bulk of Americans. Here he shows that a rags-to-riches story is still possible in America, but then only for a select few, and in the case of this subject, he did it by fleecing the “rubes.”

Thompson was convinced the hopefulness for radical change in American culture and politics had become a thing of the past.

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a big and beautiful wave. . . .

So now, less than five years later, you can go upon a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (67-8)

Everything Thompson wrote is also a requiem of sorts. A requiem for all the potential good that might have come from the realization of the hopes fostered by what began as ebullience in the early ‘60s and ended up crushed under the weight of the dominant establishment at the end of the decade.

8.3 *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ‘72:*

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ‘72 only served to further cultivate his image as an unpredictable person who frequently broke written and unwritten laws. “Some reporters from the mainstream press had contempt for this flouting of professionalism. Others, according

to his *Rolling Stone* colleague Timothy Grouse, got ‘a vicarious, Mittyesque thrill’ from reading what they secretly thought but were forbidden to say” (Gates). He cut an unusual figure among the other journalists. “The other gentlemen of the press weren’t any warmer to him. They saw him as the odd-looking, ill-attired writer from that *Rolling Stone* thing who was constantly late, delaying the press bus’s departure. He was noisy, often *on something*, and carrying a six pack” (McKeen 183). Interestingly, as the campaign went on, he developed something of a fan club among journalists for the candor of his dispatches.

Thompson cites a speech given by Sitting Bull at The Powder Ridge Council of Indians in 1877. “These people have made many rules that the rich may break, but the poor may not! They have a religion in which the poor worship, but the rich will not! They even take tithes of the poor and weak to support the rich and those who rule” (*Campaign Trail* 394). Thompson uses that speech as a metaphor for American politics and culture in 1972.

“The Powder River Conference ended ninety-five years ago, but the old chief’s baleful analysis of the White Man’s rape of the American continent was just as accurate then as it would be today if he came back from the dead and said it for the microphones of prime-time TV. The ugly fallout from the American dream has been coming down on us at a pretty consistent rate since Sitting Bull’s time—and the only real difference now, with election day ’72 only a few weeks away, is that we seem to be *ratifying* the fallout and forgetting the dream itself.

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail was another requiem for the American Dream; the sham he perceived American national politics to be in 1972.

Kevin Kizer describes Thompson’s motivation for writing *Campaign Trail*. “Thompson was really getting his fat into the fire. His next target was an old nemesis who had returned

stronger and smarter: Richard Nixon. By fluke, Thompson was allowed to interview the candidate and discovered that the formerly politically dead Nixon was ‘brighter and therefore more dangerous than I surmised. He was a brute in need of extermination’” (Kizer). Thompson wrote a scathing obituary for Nixon when he died, which reflected his hatred for the man.

The “fluke” interview described above happened this way and led Thompson to partially separate the politician from the man. Nixon had to be driven between campaign stops in New Hampshire and requested that a member of the press who knew something about football ride with him to the next stop. Thompson was the only one with expertise in football, and got the seat.

Whatever else might be said about Nixon—and there is still serious doubt in my mind that he could pass for human— he is a goddamn stone fanatic on every facet of pro football. At one point in our conversation, when I was feeling a bit pressed for leverage, I mentioned a down & out pass—in the waning moments of the 1967 Super Bowl mismatch between Green Bay and Oakland—to an obscure, second string Oakland receiver named Bill Miller that had stuck in my mind because of its pinpoint style and precision.

He hesitated for a moment, lost in thought, then he whacked me on the thigh & laughed: ‘That’s right by God! The Miami boy!’

I was stunned. He not only remembered the play, but he knew where Miller had played in college. (61)

By luck or fate, Thompson once again found himself in a conversation and place right in the middle of the action, and in a position of access to the Republican candidate that no one else had.

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72 was more cohesive than *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This cohesion could be due to the fact that the book entailed two of Thompson's favorite obsessions: politics and gambling. Early in the book, Thompson smokes dope with two hippies he has befriended. He tells them he is going to Washington to cover the Presidential campaign:

"It sounds like a stinking goddamn way to get back into work," said Lester.

I shook my head "No, I want to at least *try* this trip," I said.

Lester stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. "Why would anybody want to get hung up on a pile of shit like politics?"

"Well" . . . I said, wondering if there was a sane answer to a question like that: "It's mainly a personal trip, a very hard thing to explain."

Jerry smiled. "You talk like you've *tried it*," he said. "Like maybe you *got off on it*."

"Not as far as I meant to," I said, "but definitely high." (31-33)

Thompson, in that last statement, confirms his continuing interest in the American political process.

An avid NFL and college football fan, Thompson did not take long to recognize the potential gambling opportunities provided by the uncertainties of the primaries and actual Presidential race. "I had never covered a presidential campaign before I got into this one, but I quickly got so hooked on it that I began betting on the outcome of each primary—and, by combining aggressive ignorance with a natural instinct to mock the conventional wisdom, I managed to win all but two of the fifty or sixty bets I made between February and November"

(20). Never known to be humble, Thompson gloats somewhat over his supposedly accidental success rate at winning bets based on the campaign.

Thompson relates his disappointment that Nixon looked like he was going to win the Presidency, while revealing his liberal bent.

The polls also indicate that Nixon will get a comfortable majority of the Youth Vote. And that he might carry all fifty states [. . .]. This may be the year when we finally come face to face with ourselves; finally just lay back and say it — that we are really just a nation of 220 million used car salesmen with all the money we need to buy guns, and no qualms at all about killing anybody else in the world who tries to make us uncomfortable. The tragedy of all this is that George McGovern, for all his mistakes... understands what a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race this country might have been, if we could have kept it out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Nixon.

(Campaign Trail 413-14)

This statement also reflects his disgust with American voter apathy.

Matt Taibbi of *Slate* magazine has this to say in his 2012 retrospective.

Some of this seems trite and clichéd now, but at the time, telling the world about all of these behind-the-scenes rituals was groundbreaking stuff. That this is a great piece of documentary journalism about how American politics works is beyond question—for as long as people are interested in the topic, this will be one of the first places people look to find out what our electoral process looks like and smells like and sounds like, off-camera. Thompson caught countless nuances of that particular race that probably eluded the rest of the established reporters. It shines through in the book that he was

not merely interested in the 1972 campaign but *obsessed* by it, and he followed the minutiae of it with an addict's tenacity. (Taibbi).

Taibbi was a veteran reporter, and he was still in awe of Thompson's portrayal of the race. According to Taibbi, Thompson's approach almost single-handedly changed the way politics was reported from that point forward. According to Taibbi the book has become the "Bible" of American political reporters.

9. Thompson as Critic of Politics and Culture:

The rapid escalation of the Vietnam War increased tensions between the older, establishment generation and the younger, anti-establishment (not to mention draft-eligible) generation. "The Americanization of the war increased United States troop levels from 23,000 at the end of 1964 to 385,000 during 1966, and 535,000 by early 1968" (Hall 30). This escalation created a polarized public. One was either for, or against, the war during that period. There was no middle ground.

In June 1964, Thompson had humorously written President Johnson as an applicant for the position as Governor of American Samoa. He rescinded his offer in March 1965 with a scathing letter. One needs a few quotes in order to get a real feel for Thompson's outrage over Johnson's troop escalation in Vietnam: "I refer specifically to your hysterical Vietnam policy [. . .]. I am neither a pacifist nor an advocate of non-violence, but my sensibilities are grossly offended by the spectacle of a small group of old men whose mania for blood and bombing will inevitably cause thousands of young men to be killed for no good reason" (*Proud Highway* 496). This was a reality not many people spoke of in the early '60s, the reality of Americans being killed by the score in Vietnamese jungles.

Thompson tries to justify himself as someone whose voice deserves to be heard:

As a white Anglo-Saxon Air Force veteran and shooting enthusiast I can't be shrugged off as a politically impotent east Coast minority-group liberal beatnik draft-dodger. Nor am I totally ignorant of foreign affairs. In 1962-63 I was a South American correspondent for the *National Observer* and spent more time defending this country in arguments than I did earning a living. God knows, I would hate to be down there now, trying to explain and/or justify our Vietnam policy.

Thompson wrote this in the midst of writing about the Hell's Angels: a frank examination of a small, yet very visible group of alienated Americans who exemplify the growing anti-authority, anti-corporatism, anti-mainstream political machinations going on in the U.S.

Thompson elaborates. "The generally bizarre flavor of their offenses and their insistence on identifying themselves make good copy, but usually overwhelm—in print, at least—the unnerving truth that they represent, in colorful microcosm, what is quietly and anonymously growing all around us every day of the week" ("Motorcycle Gangs"). This commentary on the state of the culture is prescient. He goes on to elaborate: "On the other hand, at least 90 percent of the dozens of cops I talked to all over California were seriously worried about what they referred to as 'the rising tide of lawlessness' or the 'dangerous trend toward lack of respect for law and order.' To them the Hell's Angels are only a symptom of a much more threatening thing . . . the Rising Tide'" (*Hell's Angels* 258). Thompson was not an admirer of the average cop on the street. He disliked authority in all shapes and forms, yet he seemed to agree with the estimation of the police. Shortly thereafter, the Watts riots erupted in Los Angeles, California, killing 34 and injuring more than 1000 people (Farber and Bailey, 255).

The culture was in ferment during the '60s. Four prominent political and social leaders were assassinated by gun: President John F. Kennedy 1963, Malcolm X 1965, Martin Luther King,

and Robert F. Kennedy 1968. A number of culture changing movements began: the American Indian Movement, the gay liberation movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights movement, the woman's liberation movement, the Black Panther Party, and the New Left; just to name a few. Sometimes these movements had violent beginnings: Stonewall 1969, a clash with police in Greenwich Village, New York, for example, ignited the gay liberation movement (Farber and Bailey 181-254). These movements were all based on the notion of "liberation" from the patriarchal shackles of U.S. government authority. Thompson provided commentary on all of these events through various publications. The killing of a fan by the Hell's Angels at a free concert given by the Rolling Stones at Altamont, California in 1969 symbolized the end of the tumultuous decade.

Thompson seemed to envision himself as a kind of personal political bellwether. "[P]olitics—as used in journalism—[is] the art of controlling [one's] environment . . . In my case, using what politely might be called 'advocacy journalism,' I've used reporting as a weapon to affect political situations that bear down on my environment" (Wright 624). Thompson became actively involved in local politics in 1970 by forming the Freak Power party and backing a candidate for Mayor of Aspen Colorado. The strategy was to register all the diverse outlier types, hippies, dopers, artists, and apathetic souls to create a voting bloc. They also reached out to the rich and poor locals who had been witnessing the rapid changes going on around Aspen. When that candidate lost by a slim margin, Thompson himself ran for Sheriff of his County in the next election cycle. "Hunter saw the opportunity. Power resided with the people. Freaks were people, and more of us arrived every day. If we registered and we voted, we just might outnumber the complacent conservatives in November. 'Freak Power' was the surge, and HST had the courage to ride that wave" (Cleverly and Braudis 6). There was a certain appeal, to certain types of people, of the concept of freak power.

A lot of people are beginning to understand that to be a freak is an honorable way to go. This is the real point: that we're not really freaks at all—not in the literal sense—but the twisted realities of the world we are trying to live in have somehow combined to make us feel like freaks. We argue, we protest, we petition—but nothing changes. So now, with the rest of the nation erupting in a firestorm of bombings and political killings, a handful of 'freaks' are running a final, perhaps atavistic experiment with the idea of forcing change by voting. (Nichols)

Thompson lost by four hundred votes.

William Kennedy, then publisher of *The San Juan Star*, first corresponded with Thompson in a rejection letter in 1959 (*Proud Highway* 181). They developed a friendship and correspondence that lasted almost forty years. Thompson, commenting on the state of the press as early as 1959, actually comments on the state of American politics and culture.

Surely you are aware that the 'dry rot' of the press has its roots in the psychopathic complacency of the American public . . . which can be blamed almost entirely on inadequate facilities for information and education . . . for which the press is in large part responsible [. . .] and so on and so on in that familiar vicious cycle which can have its end only in the eventual disintegration of the greatest and most optimistic political experiment in the history of man. . . . (186)

In 1964, a frustrated Thompson wrote Kennedy that he was "coming to view the free enterprise system as the single greatest evil in the history of human savagery" (456). He had a long history of being keen on changing the system.

Another critic asserts: "Distinctly different, the outstanding feature of most of Thompson's output is that it has a 'moral aspect,' and it shares this defining characteristic, I

would argue, with what has become tagged the American Dream. For the ‘Dream’ can only exist within a moral landscape and for Thompson it is this morality which has gone AWOL” (Nuttall 105). Considering Thompson’s moral aspect, it is no surprise that he chose the words “decadent” and “depraved” in his title to characterize the Kentucky Derby in one of his earliest Gonzo pieces.

Later, Thompson ruminates on his cultural currency. “I can think of at least a half-dozen public realities that I managed, for good or ill, to affect by my presence, participation, or journalistic advocacy—and in retrospect I’m about 98 percent happy with whatever ripples I caused in the great swamp of history” (*Songs of 182*). Alternatively, the following journalist believes he made more than ripples:

Hunter S. Thompson didn’t just create a new form of journalism. He created a new way of thinking that is still important in today’s society. A style that is so influential that it has seeped through to the hearts and minds of the succeeding generations [. . .]. It is doubtful that many members of the Digital Age partake in the hard gonzo lifestyle of drugs and alcohol that Thompson symbolizes. However, it is hard to ignore the similarities between Thompson’s gonzo journalism and today’s growing popularity of citizen journalism through new media like blogs and Twitter. (Marinelli)

Gonzo journalism currently thrives on the internet.

There are conflicting opinions as to the meaning and reality of Thompson’s over-the-top use of drugs and alcohol. “In a letter to Jim Silberman of Random house, Thompson admitted that he had mostly fabricated the depiction of drug use in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*” (Mosser 86). According to John Hellman, “Thompson creates a self-caricature who is extremely disoriented, both by actual events, and by paranoid illusions—often induced by liquor and

drugs—in his own consciousness [. . .]. Through self-caricature Thompson is able to take Mailer’s metafictional journalism into the more radically fictive world of parody” (69). This is directly related to the persona, or mystique Thompson constructed of himself throughout the gonzo works, the mystique of a slightly dangerous journalist always willing to enter strange and potentially dangerous situations. “*Rolling Stone* editor Rich Cohen writes that Thompson ‘used drugs quite deliberately to create a new kind of reportorial voice—a voice that could be listened to but never trusted, because the reporter was hammered and seeing trails. By bringing narcotics into his prose, he introduced a hallucinatory element into nonfiction writing, his own kind of magic realism’” (Reynolds 57). Given the differing opinions, Thompson’s drug use during that period was, at that time, an open question. There is no question that the excessive drug use was an integral element of his narratives.

10. Conclusion:

Hunter S. Thompson was an astute, almost natural born writer who carved his own niche in the literary landscape, and adapted (usually not well, but successfully) to professional and personal challenges throughout his life. He was a delinquent and a respected member of a writer’s club at the same time as a teen. He was a paradox. His father left when Thompson was 11. His formative years were shaped by near-poverty. Yet he made influential lifetime friends in his adolescence who stayed with him for years. He read and discussed everything he and his fellow Athenium Club members focused on, mostly classics and philosophy. By age 17-18. He got a good taste of classical literature as well as of jail and the power of law enforcement and the criminal justice system

When writing for the *National Observer* and *Scanlan’s* in Latin America and back home in the United States, Thompson more often than not chose to champion the underdog.

A close look at some of his “prefame” work shows a man with as much heart as curiosity and more insight and prescience than one would expect from a writer who later seemed to drop skill for hype. Looking back now, his foresight can be spine-chilling.

(*Conversations With 51*)

Consider his view of the Hell’s Angels of 1964 as precursors of national unrest among the nation’s youth. It can be argued that *Hell’s Angels*, with all its eye-opening events, drug use, and interaction with law-enforcement on many levels, was essential to the development of the strong authorial voice which dominated the gonzo works.

“The hardest part of creative writing is finding your own voice.—an authentic original voice that can translate into the culture. Only a handful of writers in a generation can pull that off, and Hunter, in that regard, transcended his competition” (Wenner and Seymour 434). Wenner saw Thompson as a writer for, and of, the people.” He was also viewed by some as a humorist of the first order. His writing is in a tradition of impressionist, personalised journalism, putting colour in the facts, that goes back to practitioners like Mark Twain and Charles Dickens” (Williams). Everything he wrote held meaning for his mostly younger fans. A journalist named David Hamilton met Thompson in South America before he wrote *Hell’s Angels*. “Hamilton says Thompson, not yet the famous gonzo journalist he would become, spoke of writers as actors shaping the unfolding events surrounding them. He also says Thompson wanted to be a part of the action, not just an outside observer” (Grubb 3). Like Twain, Thompson was not afraid to mix in with average people and add color and wry humor to their experiences.

Thompson had his finger on the pulse of his fans through the decades. He spoke truth to power and was the journalistic everyman. John Nichols writes: “Thompson was to the political class of the United States in the latter part of the 20th century what William Hazlitt was to the English poets of the early 19th century: a critic who was so astute, so engaged and so unyielding

in his idealism that he ultimately added more to the historical canon than did many of his subjects.” Nichols believes Thompson’s work still holds great value historically.

He receives respect as a cultural and political critic, but does gonzo qualify as literature?

The Oxford English Dictionary contains five entries for “literature,” three of which apply directly to Thompson’s writing, the remaining two are generalist definitions.

1. Familiarity with letters or books; knowledge acquired from reading or studying books, esp. the principal classical texts associated with humane learning _literary culture; learning, scholarship.

2. The action or process of writing a book or literary work; literary ability or output; the activity or profession of an author or scholar; the realm of letters or books.

3a. The result or product of literary activity; written works considered collectively; a body of literary works produced in a particular country or period, or of a particular genre.

3b. Without defining word: written work valued for superior or lasting artistic merit

Gonzo certainly qualifies as literature based on each of these definitions.

The “Fear and Loathing” books are cultural artifacts, as are the “Motorcycle Gangs” article and *Hell’s Angels*. They reflect a brief period in U.S. history, the social urgency of which has not been repeated since. His books are as eminently readable today as they were when written.

Jason Grubb, in his thesis “The Role and Rhetoric of Hunter S. Thompson,” breaks gonzo writing into four components. “Thompson is not merely present during the story; he makes

himself the story" (26).[. . .] " He uses his Raoul Duke persona to blend reality and fiction" [. . .].Thompson is an "Unreliable Reporter" by choice.[. . .] "Thompson himself fills a classic literary role. He is the Fool figure. He is the court jester" (30). "The final component of Thompson's delivery is its subjectivity. This is the primary attribute of Thompson's writing that has garnered him the most exclusionary, unaccepting criticism" (32). Grubb sees Thompson as a writer rather than a journalist, using specific techniques to craft his work. They are serious works, they simply defy classification in the established literary canon

Thompson gives this explanation of his methodology and self-perception as a writer. In response to the question as to whether there is a difference between the New Journalism of the period and gonzo he makes this very clear. "Yeah, I think so, unlike Tom Wolfe or Gay Talese, for instance, I almost never try to *reconstruct* a story. They are both much better *reporters* than I am, but then I don't really think of myself as a reporter" (*Conversations With* 22). He was a reporter first chronologically, but always aspired to be a novelist.

There is also the question of whether or not his Gonzo image overshadowed his body of work. "Hunter S. Thompson has long been known as the literary journalist whose stories necessarily pivoted on his own actions in order to succeed. This excessive 'Gonzo' persona, which served him spectacularly well in the early '70s, eventually overwhelmed his content and exiled him from the journalistic main stage to a kind of sideshow of recidivist buffoonery. There he remained for a quarter century until his self-inflicted demise" (51). Reynolds believes, it seems, that Thompson's own cultivated image led to his not being taken seriously in scholarly literary circles.

There is no question now that Hunter S. Thompson was an important literary, political, and cultural critic who stood out on paper and in person during that period as more than the

cult figure he later became. It is up to the literary establishment to show Hunter S. Thompson the same respect as a writer that he receives from his legions of readers. Thompson's quotes reverberate through the culture on a regular basis. Gonzo is part of the lexicon. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in his work. History will assign him a proper place in American culture.

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