

# To Bring Order out of Chaos – Highlighting the Chaos Inherent in the Order

- *How Hunter S. Thompson's early texts give value to fiction by  
challenging the authority of politically constructed truths*



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## Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven omhandler Hunter S. Thompson og hans plass i den litterære kanon over amerikanske skjønnlitterære forfattere. Gjennom en lesning av Thompsons tidlige artikler hentet fra samlingen *The Great Shark Hunt* utgitt av *Summit Books* i 1979, distanserer jeg Thompson fra hans utnevnte rolle som «Duke of Gonzo» og analyserer hans verker på bakgrunn av de litterære kvaliteter som finnes i dem. Ut fra min lesning bør Thompson bli anerkjent som skjønnlitterær forfatter, da hans tekster innehar vesentlige elementer som gjør det begrensede å definere dem som journalistikk. Med et teoretisk bakteppe fra Mikhail Bakhtin, Derek Attridge og Rafe McGregor viser jeg hvordan skillet mellom journalistikk og fiksjon baserer seg på fremstillingen av sannhet, og hvordan sannhet som konsept krever subjektiv tolkning. Hovedpoenget i oppgavens andre halvdel er å påpeke den politiske diskusjonen om hvem som eier og autoritativt hevder å presentere en fullstendig sannhet i Thompsons verker, og hvordan denne diskusjonen er en mer logisk rød tråd enn hans utskjelser som komisk figur. Ved å lese Thompson som skjønnlitterær forfatter søker denne masteroppgaven å fremheve en av grunnene til at litteraturen fremdeles er et viktig demokratisk verktøy i det moderne samfunn

*“He catches things. Using a sort of venomous, satirical approach, he exaggerates the two or three things that horrify him in a scene or situation... And you can say that these people didn’t look exactly like that, but when you look at them again it seems pretty damn close... He doesn’t merely render a scene, he interprets it.”*

- Hunter S. Thompson on Ralph Steadman (“A Conversation on Ralph Steadman and his Book, *America*, with Dr. Hunter S. Thompson”)

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## Introduction

The phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” was reportedly first used in Ivan S. Turgenev’s novel *Father and Sons* from 1861 (Martin). Popularized through the use of graphic advertisement, the phrase gained traction in America in the early 1900s. However, it becomes relevant for Hunter S. Thompson’s work as the initial quote is delivered in dialogue, when, discussing geology, a character expresses “The drawing shows me at one glance what might be spread over ten pages in a book” (106). Rather than discussing the merits of photography, the original quote pertains to an illustration, a drawing, defined as art as much as any word could be. The subtle, but crucial nuance here is perhaps best illustrated by Thompson’s own description of how “a Cartier-Bresson photography is always (he says) the full-frame negative. No alterations in the darkroom, no cutting or cropping, no spotting ... no editing” (106). This quote is from a discussion on the creation of Thompson’s most commercially successful work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, in which he states his original intention with the work as having “the eye & mind of the journalist be functioning as a camera” (106).

Despite this stated intention, however, Thompson normally avoided photographers. Instead he started a collaboration with the English illustrator Ralph Steadman, and though iconic, there is very little in Steadman’s work to suggest photo-realism. In a later article, Thompson would go on to suggest that “the purpose of art is supposedly to bring order out of chaos” (“What Lured Hemingway to Ketchum” 372). In this thesis I will explore how his work sets about doing this, and, in the process, distances itself from the photographic approach of the journalist. Through a selection of his earlier texts, I will argue that Thompson opposes the

notion of a picture being worth a thousand words due to its inherent finality, the ultimate, complete judgement of a moment captured perfectly. Rather, Thompson's work, when interpreted on its literary merits, emphasizes a multifaceted understanding of truth, in which subjective interpretation is not only valuable, but necessary. Thompson's work, especially from before his coronation as the "Duke of Gonzo," highlights the value of fiction and literature. The idiomatic phrase suggests "a picture is worth a thousand words" yet Thompson's work show that whereas a picture might feign objectivity, its value still draws on subjective understanding. As such, for art to have a purpose, Thompson presupposes, and through a political questioning forces the reader to consider, that the world is more chaotic than presented.

The 1980 *Picador* reprint of *The Great Shark Hunt*, describes Thompson as "the author of many violent books and brilliant political essays, which his friends and henchmen in the international media have managed for many years to pass off as 'Gonzo Journalism.'" As his public persona is well-known and seemingly cemented, Thompson's cultural standing and literary legacy therefore requires a short summary before going into detail about the procedural outline of this thesis.

### **Dethroning the Duke of Gonzo**

Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1939, Hunter Stockton Thompson, in his own words, "grew into delinquency" after his father's death in 1954 (McKeen 3). Described as charming and intelligent, Thompson was passionately interested in literature, with favourites including Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner, the latter stemming from a shared southern background to Thompson. After being kicked-out of the U.S Air Force despite showing "outstanding talent

in writing,” Thompson would travel around the US and Puerto Rico as a journalist, never lasting long in any particular magazine or paper, sporadically working on his great American novel (*Great Shark Hunt*, 14).

After years of toiling he finally got his big break with an article on the Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang, published in *the Nation* in 1964 (McKeen XV). Providing an alternate view on the growing and demonized motorcycle gangs of the early sixties, Thompson was offered several book deals, with the end result being *Hell’s Angels – A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang* published by *Random House* in 1967. The book became a tremendous success and placed Thompson on the American cultural map. In part this stemmed from the notorious process of writing the novel, as Thompson rode with the Angels for a year without ever actually joining them as a member. Instead, he became the mediator between the American public and the Hells Angels; the book simultaneously exposed how the poor, misinformed and sensationalistic journalism of the contemporary newspapers contributed to constructing a demonized (and sometimes glorified) image of the motorcycle gang, whilst giving an uncompromising account of the more horrific events and aspects of their lifestyle. Though he at first glance might seem to achieve this role by having a foot in each camp, it would be more accurate to describe him as an outsider to both environments, an entity on his own. The book gives a severely politically incorrect depiction of Thompson himself, as he seemingly admits to committing multiple felonies, including driving under the influence and unscrupulous drug abuse. At the same time though, there are clear references in the text to how neither Thompson nor the Angels considers him to be one of them, and he scatters his texts with literary references to, amongst others, Woody Guthrie, Allen Ginsberg and Joseph Conrad.

After this success, Thompson’s career went from strength to strength. Joining the newly formed *Rolling Stone Magazine* in 1970 finally allowed him the freedom and encouragement

he needed to perfect his distinguishable voice. Stylistically he developed the outsider role that proved so effective with his portrayal of the Hell's Angels, but with an added focus on subjectivity. His 1970 article on the Kentucky derby, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" and his second major novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1972) were seen as the defining standard of his writing, and this particular style was dubbed Gonzo journalism.

In addition to this, his writing became increasingly (at least, explicitly) political and he covered the 1972 election campaign as an outspoken supporter of George McGovern. He also found time to run for sheriff in his hometown of Aspen, Colorado, running on what he dubbed the "freak power" movement (PICADOR 162). Though his run was unsuccessful, his role and position in American society was cemented; he became "our official crazy" according to the *New York Times* (*Great Shark Hunt*). The first edition of *The Great Shark Hunt*, published by *Summit Books* in 1979, emphasizes his iconic status, describing him as "a legend in his own time."

In the various obituaries that surfaced after Thompson's death by suicide in 2004, he is frequently referred to as a "maverick journalist," (*New York Times*) "dean of Gonzo" (Rolling Stone), or some variation of what the BBC called an "unflinching and acerbic chronicler of US counterculture". Depending on the article read, "Gonzo" was first unleashed upon the world through Thompson's first article, his first book, the article "The Temptations of Jean Claude Killy" or "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved", or with the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Both *the Telegraph* and *The Economist* define Thompson in the first paragraph as the "Doctor of Gonzo," whilst several others – including the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* – feature comments on how it was Thompson himself who coined and used the expression about his own writing.



Definitions of what gonzo actually is has been difficult to pinpoint. The *OED* helpfully defines it both as an adjective denoting “a type of committed, subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetorical style” and as a noun, to be used either for a person writing Gonzo journalism, or “a fool, a crazy person” (“gonzo” *OED*) Though all of these seem immediately applicable, they tell us very little about where the word came from and how it fits in with general journalism or writing. Among the more credible critics, notably Thom Wolfe and William McKean, it is accepted that Gonzo journalism sprung to life as a sub-genre from the New Journalism of the sixties in the U.S. This claims appear to be backed by the fact that in their anthology on *The New Journalism*, Thom Wolfe and E.W Johnson have included Thompson twice, featuring both “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and an excerpt from *Hell’s Angels*.

In his introduction to *The New Journalism*, Wolfe writes that upon arriving in both New York City and California in the sixties he encountered a “hulking carnival” full of “this amazing spectacle” that he “just knew [...] some enterprising novelist was going to come along and do this whole marvellous scene with one gigantic daring bold stroke” (30). Instead, what he and the publisher got from the novelists were “the Prince of Alienation ... sailing off to Lonesome Island on his Tarot boat [...] his Timeless cape on, reeking of camphor balls” (30-31). Sanford Pinsker (1980) summarizes the literary scene of the sixties in *Between Two Worlds: the American Novel in the 1960’s* as a time when “navel-gazing became a popular indoor sport”(8-9). This meant the task of actually describing a changing society fell to the journalists, who, according to Wolfe, went about their business by introducing literary techniques in their articles.

The literary technique was introduced, according to Wolfe, by the journalists desire to introduce realism (31). Wolfe claims the greatness of Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Mann and Faulkner, comes from how they “first wired their work into the main circuit, which is realism”

(34). In response to critique from contemporary writers and other journalists, Wolfe argues that in order to achieve this realism, which he defines as traditional journalism with *additions*, the New Journalists augmented the journalistic approach, rather than simplified it:

The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters. That was why it was so ironic when both the journalistic and literary old guards began to attack this new journalism as “impressionistic.” The most important things one attempted in terms of technique depended upon a depth of information that had never been demanded in newspaper work. (21)

Wolfe, and other writers associated with New Journalism, like Gary Talese or Joe Louis, would introduce, amongst other literary devices, realistic dialogues and different narrative techniques in their texts. Though there was never any concrete movement or club, as Wolfe puts it, “no manifestos, clubs, salons cliques; not even a saloon where the faithful gathered” (23), what united the New Journalists were an acceptance for and a willingness to,

in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space ... to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally (15)

However, this is also where I argue Thompson differentiates himself from not only New Journalism, but journalism in general. The New Journalists were predominantly occupied with achieving realism, frequently by using literary devices which normally was regarded as

exclusive to fiction. This resulted in texts that were not removed from journalism, rather they were journalistic articles which employed literary techniques in order to better “give the full objective description” (Wolfe 21). What I would argue Thompson does is instead to use literary techniques on their own terms, utilizing the possibilities of fiction as a way of presenting subjective angles and aspects inaccessible to journalism.

In the introduction I referenced how the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” was first used to describe a drawing, and mentioned how this is relevant to Thompson’s work as his work is characterized by his desire to *interpret* the world, rather than *report* it. This is also what distances Thompson not only from journalism, defined by Wolfe as “the full objective description,” but from the New Journalists in general (21). Rather than accepting Wolfe’s definition of New Journalism as an attempt to *add* to “the full objective description,” Thompson’s texts reject the possibility of such an endeavour outright (21).

If we look at Thompson’s work pre-*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, there is evidence of a writer who, instead of adapting literary devices to give the full, objective, journalistic description, attempts, as Linda Hutchinson – one of the few critics to read Thompson as a literary writer – puts it in “The Pastime of Past Time”, to “perceive and impose [a] pattern on what he saw about him” (484). In other words, rather than exaggerating or distorting truth, Thompson adopts several, often contrasting, voices to form a coherent – though necessarily incomplete and interpreted – version of truth. Whereas the New Journalists were an offspring of the journalistic belief of objective truth, Thompson’s text show a dialogic understanding of truth as a multifaceted concept, dependant on subjective interpretation – and then gives the reader *a* subjective interpretation, whilst being fully open about its sources of influence. Thompson later quoted Faulkner in the “Jacket Copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*,” as to how “the best fiction is far more

true than any kind of journalism,” and before he was cemented as the “Duke of Gonzo,” Thompson frequently showed why in his texts.

### **“To Richard Milhous Nixon, Who Never Let Me Down”<sup>1</sup>**

The ultimate aim of this thesis is two-fold. Whilst immediately concerned with opening Hunter S. Thompson’s work to broader range of criticism based on its so-far unappreciated literary potential, it will simultaneously illustrate why, in 2016, not only Thompson but fiction writing in general remains and provides an essential aspect and important democratic function in modern society. At the base of this discussion lies Thompson’s belief in Faulkner’s quote of how “the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism, and the best journalists have always known this” (*Great Shark Hunt* 105). From this outset I aim to show why Thompson should be read as a writer of fiction and, when done so, why and how his literature provides a defence for the value of fiction by questioning the political objectivity of authority in truth.

These are lofty ambitions, and to reach them the thesis has been sub-divided into two chapters, each taking its name from one half of the aforementioned Faulkner quote. However, as it is necessary to first discuss Thompson’s role as a writer of fiction before going on to look at the repercussions this has on his work, the quote is reversed, meaning the first chapter is named “and the best journalist have always known this.”

In defining Thompson as a writer of fiction, chapter 1 will look at his literary approach to character portrayals. The first and perhaps most critical feature to consider is the distancing between Thompson’s role as author, and his perceived role as narrating protagonist. Firstly, I will look at Thompson’s personal correspondence as opposed to his professional output, and

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<sup>1</sup> Opening dedication to *The Great Shark Hunt*

see how this changes the narrative tone. With the awareness of Thompson's deliberate use of a narrator I will then compare and contrast the narration in "Travelers Hears Mountain Music Where Its Sung," first published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1962, and "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" from *Scanlans Monthly* in 1970 to show why the texts *demand* a separation between the narrator and protagonist. Likewise, I will show that the role of the protagonist is consciously manipulated by the narrator in order to serve a literary function – and that this is persistent throughout not only the texts discussed in this thesis, but in Thompson's work in general. In essence, I wish to show why removing the spectre of the Duke of Gonzo allows for the discovery of literary traits in Thompson's texts which demand they be read as literature.

Furthermore, I will show how a temporally displaced narrator influences the portrayal of other characters in his texts, and how, in these portrayals, fiction is used as a means to reveal truth. The portrayals in question concern Ernest Hemingway, from the text "What Lured Hemingway to Ketchum?" first published in the *National Observer* in 1964, and Jean-Claude Killy's depiction in "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy" first published in *Scanlan's Monthly* in 1970. By analysing the aspect through which these characters are presented, I will show why it is impossible to distance them from the literary technique of the narrator's depiction, and, as such, why it is impossible to speak of them as Hemingway or Killy in general, but rather Hemingway-in-Thompson and Killy-in-Thompson. The aim of this analysis will be to show *why* these depictions can still be considered true representations, and what repercussions this has for journalism's defined goal of portraying "the full objective description" (Wolfe 21). Through a literary approach, Thompson's texts moves from monologism to dialogism, presenting truth as a subjective, multi-faceted experience, and these portrayals illustrate the value inherent in this understanding.

From the shift of Thompson as journalist to fiction writer, Chapter 2, entitled “The best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism,” is able to consider the literary themes present in his texts. Firstly, by reading “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” as a retelling of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, I aim to show how Thompson adopts Conrad’s social critique to his contemporary context. Conrad’s influence on Thompson has long been ignored, but the persistent discussion of the political subjectivity of an authoritative truth is a recurring subject not only in their work, but in the works of a number of great American writers, including Faulkner and Herman Melville. In discussing “A Footloose American in a Smugglers’ Den” from the *National Observer* in 1964, I will extend the reading of Thompson as a politically minded writer of fiction by exploring how this text illustrates the limits of monologism, and how this limitation is consciously and explicitly highlighted.

As the aim of this thesis is two-fold, the last, conclusive section, will similarly be divided, with the first part seeking to summarize what this thesis has added to Thompson, and how the literary approach to his early work is rewarded. The second part extends this conclusion by regarding Thompson’s literary legacy in this new light, reconsidering his position in the annals of American writers as well as highlighting *a* reason – not proffering at any point to be the sole aspect or complete end – why fiction remains valuable to modern society.

Throughout this discussion I will be considering the work of various critics, both in terms of Thompson scholarships, and larger, more traditional discussions on the relationship between literature, fiction and truth. Chief among these works will be William McKeen’s biography of Thompson, Rafe McGregor’s work on “Literary Thickness,” Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen’s *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* as well as other articles, Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and Linda Hutchinson’s “The Pastime of Past Time”. My use and references to McKeen in particular requires an important notice, as I am

not arguing against McKeen's or any other critics analysis of Thompson's *journalism* as much as claiming that reading Thompson's work *as* journalism in the first place is reductive. However, as McKeen is one of few critics who have offered insightful work on greater extents of Thompson's career, I have often used his views as a starting point for critical discussion, as well as representative of critical attitudes towards Thompson's work.

With this remains little left to say in the introduction, and instead allow this thesis to begin the exploration of a writer who, in his own words, "no matter how hard he tries, he just can't help but tell the truth" ("Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl" 71).

## CHAPTER 1 – “...And the best journalists have always known this”

“Between the Idea and the Reality ... Falls the Shadow”

- T.S. Eliot (preface to *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* '72)

In writing on Hunter S. Thompson there is an immediate danger of letting the demanding personality and distinct humour of his voice overshadow other elements of his work, which are frequently equally as deserving of attention. Though the magnetism of Thompson’s voice is intriguing and part of what distinguishes his work, what I will attempt in this chapter is to expand the scope of Thompson’s literature by narrowing my discussion to a single pervading element: the use and depiction of real-life characters in his texts. As this may initially seem counter-intuitive, my argument is that part of what distinguishes Thompson’s work is his liberal use of fiction and, as has often been overlooked in his texts, how this fictionality intertwines with his portrayal of characters. As one of few critics to accredit Thompson as a writer of fiction, Linda Hutchinson describes how Thompson “attempts to perceive and impose [a] pattern on what he saw around him,” yet the novelty of including a first-person journalist (often read as Thompson himself) has detracted the focus away from how this angle is used to construct the other, at times even the main, characters of the text (Pastime of Past-Time 484).

The first half of this chapter will focus on what often draws attention both in readings and critical writing on Thompson, namely the relation between author and the textual characters of protagonists and narrators. Despite the temptation to read them as the same character, Thompson’s work, when seen as a whole, demands a separation. Ultimately, if a



reader chooses to correlate Thompson with either the protagonist or the narrator, then he or she is overlooking textual evidence.

Moving on, I wish to explore how Thompson's literary approach to depicting real-life characters reveals the value of fiction and literature. This will be done by looking at how he constructs the supportive cast to the often dominating protagonist through literary means, and to what end. Though based on subjective interpretations and fictional liberties, the reader is nonetheless given a deeper understanding of the subjects of the article – at least within the framework presented – and is forced to consider how this portrayal relates to truth, and whether Thompson has, to quote Joseph Conrad, “rendered justice” to his subjects (157)<sup>2</sup>.

Ultimately, what this chapter seeks to argue – as does the thesis in general – is that in place of “his excursions into depravity” (as it was defined by an obituary in *The Economist*), Thompson's work, when seen as a whole, is a strong defence of the value of fiction and literature, through the questioning of a politicised truth.

### 1.1 Thompson versus Thompson

There are signs to suggest that for the reader to analogously “render justice” to Thompson, he or she need to account for what McKeen describes as how Thompson, through his work after the success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* “seems self-conscious and hyper-aware of the image he must now maintain”. Jay Cowan, a personal friend of Thompson, writes in his biography that, though “Hunter was a tireless writer whose volumes of correspondence far

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<sup>2</sup> Towards the latter stages of *Heart of Darkness* Marlow references how he could not “render justice” about the details of Kurtz' death to his betrothed: “Hadn't he said he only wanted justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark – too dark altogether” (Conrad 157). By doing so, Marlow compares “rendering justice” to telling the truth – or at least his experience of truth.

outstrip the rest of his commercial output [...] he always did it with one eye towards publication” (4). Though they would later be published independently, a section of this personal correspondence from Thompson’s time as a foreign correspondent for the *National Observer* has been reprinted as an article under the title “Chatty Letters During a Journey from Aruba to Rio.” In this section, eleven personal telegrams from Thompson to his editors are published with a preface from the editorial staff describing them as “the personal experiences of the digging, inquisitive newsman” (*Great Shark Hunt* 365). I include one of these eleven here in full, to give the reader a sense of how vastly different they are to Thompson’s professional work:

Quito, Ecuador.

The sun is shining in Quito, the mountains are green and sparkling around the town, and my mind is running in high gear.

Most everything I have to say, however, revolves in one way or another around the question of money. There seems to be a universal impression that I am on some sort of Divine Dole, and the theory that I often require money in order to make money has not gained wide acceptance: I trust you have sufficient background in Personal Economics to grasp the full meaning of this.

I could toss in a few hair-raising stories about what happens to poor Yanquis who eat cheap food, or the fact that I caught a bad cold in Bogota because my hotel didn’t have hot water, but that would just depress us both. As it is, I am travelling at least half on gall. But in the course of these travels I have discovered that gall is not always the best currency and there are times when I would be far better off with the other kind.

I am throwing this thing in your lap though I don't expect anyone to agree— at a distance of several thousand miles— with my certain knowledge that I am a paragon of wisdom, courage, decency, and visionary talent. On the other hand, I am working on my fourth case of dysentery, my stomach feels like a tree is growing in it, and I am medically forbidden to touch so much as a single beer.

Well, this is the longest letter I've written since I was In the Air Force and was sending love letters to a girl In Tallahassee. I don't expect you to be altogether happy with this one, out then the girl wasn't always happy with hers, either, and we both survived.

Ah. it is noon now, check-out time, and I can hear the clang of the cash register across the patio as they rack up another \$7 to Señor Thompson, the gringo with the messy room. (366-67)

The tone of the narrator in this text is vastly different from that of Thompson's commercial work, despite his recognizable use of humour, irony and exaggeration. Here he is self-deprecating and revealing, and though he accepts the role of Yanqui, Señor and gringo, they are bestowed upon him rather than the protagonist claiming them. Similarly, this text seems to suggest he is not so much launching off into "excursions of depravity" for the sake of an improved story; rather the conditions are affecting the way he experiences, at first, very passionate and detailed political stories. Consider also how detached he is in the following telegram, in contrast to his alleged role as "the centrepiece of his work" (McKean XI):

Cali, Colombia,

My figures sent earlier on the price of Colombian coffee on the world market are correct, but not nearly as dramatic as the following: Ninety cents a pound in 1964, 30 cents a

pound In 1962. As I said, Colombia depends on coffee for 17 per cent of its export earnings.

Incidentally, Colombia gets another 16 per cent of its export earnings from petroleum. That leaves 8 per cent as a base to begin "diversifying" with. Not much, eh? Some good minds are just about at the end of their tether with the problem.

While I'm talking here, the Alliance for Progress thing is a toughie, because most of the hard-nose opposition to it is sulky and silent. In a lot of cases, the Alliance faces a problem not unlike that of trying to convince Jay Gould that he is not acting in the best interests of his country.

Incidentally, Rojas Pinilla is without doubt the only dictator whose name is in the phone book in the capital city over which he once held sway. He lives in the best section of Bogota. (366)

There is very little in this dispatch which appears congruent with the "drugged, burned-out narrator" which John Hellmann claims dominates Thompson's work (69). Similarly, compared to the "manic, highly adrenal" narrator of "The Temptations" or the "frantic loser, inept and half psychotic" of "The Kentucky Derby," the narrator in this letter is not only more understated, but also far more precise and detailed (Wolfe 172). Whilst remaining subjective in his evaluations, he nevertheless reports to objective facts and figures as a way of supporting his argument, rather than his experience of actual events. As such, the focus in this text is on *what* is being reported, rather than the literary combination with significant weight on *how* it is being reported.

These are features often ignored by critics regarding Thompson's early work as preparation for his gonzo breakthrough. However, overlooking pieces such as "Chatty Letters," "Brazilshooting" – which is told entirely in the third person – and "A Northern Town with

Southern Problems” – which features no protagonist at all – is failing to recognize that rather than honing his style, these texts are evidence of Thompson’s desire to tackle serious political issues. Seen as a whole, politics is by far a greater thread in his work than “his excursions into depravity” (*The Economist*).

In order to uncover Thompson in his texts, then, the reader should not be looking at comparisons to protagonist or narrator, but at the thematic concerns the texts chose to tackle.

### 1.1.1 “To Wit”

Though it is possible to find texts without a personally engaged first person narrator or protagonists in Thompson’s work (as exemplified by texts such as “A Southern Town with Northern Problems” first published in *The Reporter* in 1963 and “The Inca of the Andes: He Haunts the Ruins of His Once-Great Empire” published in *National Observer* in 1963), what characterises most of his texts is the dominating voice of the narrator, and what McKeen calls the “just-between-us shared language of conspiracy that would mark his work with originality” (19). Consider the first two paragraphs of “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” quoted here in its entirety:

I got off the plane around midnight and no one spoke as I crossed the dark runway to the terminal. The air was thick and hot, like wandering into a steam bath. Inside, people hugged each other and shook hands...big grins and a whoop here and there: "By God! You old bastard! Good to see you, boy! Damn good...and I mean it!"

In the air-conditioned lounge I met a man from Houston who said his name was something or other--"but just call me Jimbo"--and he was here to get it on. "I'm ready for anything, by God! Anything at all. Yeah, what are you drinkin?" I ordered a Margarita with ice, but he wouldn't hear of it: "Naw, naw...what the hell kind of drink is that for Kentucky Derby time? What's wrong with you, boy?" He grinned and winked at the bartender. "Goddam, we gotta educate this boy. Get him some good whiskey..."

(24-25)

What the reader is given in this opening section is a supremely subjective description, and a clear distinction between the protagonist and his surroundings. Though the protagonist is never described by the narrator (Jimbo's use of pronoun would suggest he is male), the reader is nevertheless engaged on a personal and intimate level by the depictions, and the subjective experiences of the protagonist. Together with the suggestive title, the reader is given investigative impressions of people and conversations, as if alluding to something sinister lurking beneath the surface. Whereas the other characters in the text appear unified in jubilation, the protagonist is, so far at least, portrayed more neutrally, seemingly noting the festive atmosphere without joining in. The protagonist's role as an outsider is enhanced by his opening dialogue with Jimbo – where only the latter's voice is heard – in which there appears to be a set of unwritten rules related to the Derby which the narrator is either not aware of or consciously not adhering to. Either way, the division between the locals and the protagonist has already been established, as has the intimate tone between the narrator and the reader which is going to dominate the piece.

McKeen writes that it is "ironic that Thompson is usually the centrepiece of his work but really tells us very little about himself" (XI). This definition is problematic because it automatically assumes that Thompson himself is both protagonist and narrator in every text,

which not only restricts the texts but ignores evidence that this is simply not the case. Despite the persistent honesty, comic irony and personal engagement between narrator and reader throughout Thompson's oeuvre, the voices of his narrators nonetheless have distinctive differences, which in turn leads to drastically different portrayals of protagonists – and there are multiple, though often dwarfed, differences between the protagonists as well. As an example, note the understated tone of the opening paragraphs from “Traveler Hears Mountain Music Where It's Sung”:

Renfro Valley, Ky – The Bluegrass country is cold and brown in the winter. Night comes early and the horses are taken inside to sleep in heated barns. The farmers sit around pot bellied stoves and pass the time with a banjo and a jug and sometimes a bit of talk. Not many visitors here in the winter. [...]

Now perhaps 150 people will show up. They come from Berea and Crab Orchard, and Preachersville and places like Egypt and Shoulderblade across the mountains. Not many from out of state [...]

Folks around here don't have much time for strangers. You ask what goes on in Renfro Valley and they shrug and say, 'not much.' You want to find a restaurant after 8.p.m and – if you can find anybody to ask – they'll direct you to Lexington, an hour's drive.

You have a thirst and they tell you, 'this here is dry country.' Pause. 'Yep, dry country'. 343

In a superficial comparison of events this scene and the opening to “The Kentucky Derby” seem to have multiple similarities, and yet they play out very differently due to the tone of the narrator. As in “The Kentucky Derby,” the opening to “Traveler” features the arrival of an

outside protagonist at a cultural event in Kentucky. Similarly, the early introductions are made of a description of the locals, of the gathered crowd, and, finally, of the protagonist and drinking. However, there are significant differences between the two, most of all concerning how the narrator uses and portrays the protagonist. In both these cases it is plausible for the narrator and protagonist to be the same person, though there is at least a temporal mediation affecting the narration in “The Kentucky Derby”. At one point the text, which has until this point progressed linearly in the present tense, breaks up:

My notes and recollections from Derby Day are somewhat scrambled. But now, looking at the big red notebook I carried all through that scene, I see more or less what happened. The book itself is somewhat mangled and bent; some of the pages are torn, others are shrivelled and stained by what appears to be whiskey, but taken as a whole, with sporadic memory flashes, they seem to tell the story. To wit: (33)

This paragraph distinguishes itself by belonging to a different temporal location than the rest of the text, revealing how the immediacy of the events experienced by the protagonist is, if we still consider the narrator and the protagonist to be the same, *at least* mediated by a passing of time. Comparatively, it is only on the last page of “Traveler,” four paragraphs from the end, that the personal pronoun is used by the narrator. Until then, the protagonist has been much more reserved than The Journalist of “The Kentucky Derby.”

Whereas it is clearly the protagonist’s action who drives the story and moves the plot to its final denouement in “The Kentucky Derby,” the protagonist in “Traveler” is much more subtle in his influence – which is not to say he is any less subjective in his judgements. Rather, these judgements are hidden away as general statements, quotes are given supposedly ad



verbatim and the story told in the present tense to involve the reader: “The announcer finishes and heaves a sigh of relief,” “It’s 9:30 in Rock Caste county and the old Kentucky barn dance is over until next week,” “Lair says goodnight and leaves to go home. Outside the parking lot is almost empty” (344). The protagonist is not explicitly revealed until the final section – when the tense changes from present to past – and the story is revealed to be experienced by a “city boy” with “a license plate from Louisville,” who is prone to be “roamin’ around late at night” (345). It is only with this final section that the texts evolves from being a report from a concert in Renfro Valley to literature; opening up for debates on the relation and differences between urban and rural values, people and culture. The story evolves from a personally involved Thompson-as-journalist, to a tale of the prototypical “city-boy” exploring rural America.

Looking at the five protagonists this thesis will treat, there appears to be an overlapping congruence of personal traits and backgrounds. Perhaps most prominent is the recurring mention or reference to the protagonists being American journalists (though this is never explicitly stated and only inferred in “What Lured,” “A Footloose American,” and “Traveler”). There are, however, peculiarities to the kind of journalism the protagonists seek to achieve. Regarding them as variations of the same recurring character – an aspect of Thompson himself – McKeen describes Thompson’s protagonist as a journalist wishing to “bring his truth to the fore,” rather than accepting “what someone in authority says” (39,38). This refusal of authority is what cements their roles as outsiders in each text; in an attempt to describe their idiocultural identity, a term coined by Derek Attridge and defined as the “embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and modes of behaviour,” it is impossible to read Thompson’s protagonists as representatives of mainstream America (21). Rather, their repeated involvement and treatment of themes such as sport, alcohol, politics, gambling, fame, self-destruction, literature, and the lens of masculinity through which all these are viewed, seem rather to represent the disillusioned and alienated young, white male of the 1960s – which at the time

included multiple further distinctive sub-groups, from the beatniks to the Hells Angels. Similarly, as McKeen observes, “many of [Thompson’s] articles emphasize his closeness to the action,” even in dangerous situations, seem to build up under this masculine image (McKeen 18). However, though this aspect of Thompson is yet to be covered by critics, what I will focus on is how, despite these similarities, the protagonists end up serving drastically different functions in their respective narratives, and that this is due to the literary portrayal of the narrator.

Despite a number of similarities in the presentation and background of the protagonists which can frequently be compared to Thompson’s own and thus lead to an equation, that would undermine the effect of the particular form through which they are portrayed. Though their roots appear similar, the “frantic loser, inept and half-psychotic” of “The Kentucky Derby” affects the text in a very different way to how the “city-boy” from “Traveler” enacts and affects his (Wolfe 172, Thompson 345). It is this impossibility of distancing the protagonist from the text he appears in which changes Thompson’s work from journalism to literature.

In his article “Literary Thickness”, Rafe McGregor presents two concepts which he claims are both critical and universal in all works classified as literature. The first of these is the notion of literary function, dictating the writer’s awareness of his texts by stating how “what is in the work is there for a purpose, that is, things are not just accidentally as they are” (11). This is entirely applicable to Thompson, as his “work seems disjointed, spontaneous, and loose, and it could only appear so if it were none of the above” (McKeen X)<sup>3</sup>. In regards to “The

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<sup>3</sup> Jay Cowan, a close personal friend of Thompson’s, reveals in his biography *Hunter S. Thompson, An Insider’s View of Deranged, Depraved, Drugged Out Brilliance*, how even letters sent to the local newspapers went through several edited drafts: “As a gift and a writer’s lesson for me, he gave me the original of one of the letters. It was not only a remarkable collectible, but evidence to me of how seriously he took even a letter to the editor, revealing a series of edits he made to nearly half of the lines in it” (4).

Kentucky Derby” and “Traveler,” it would suggest that the portrayals of the protagonist is done deliberately, and Thompson is aware of the literary potential of his different approaches.

The second of McGregor’s concepts is his titular “literary thickness,” which he defines as follows: “the inseparability of literary form and literary content in the experience of a literary work is such that neither form nor content can be isolated” (4). McGregor goes on to define the concepts of *form* and *content* as “form is how a poet says something; content is what the poet says” (4). By allowing form and content to be inseparable, and acknowledging that they affect each other, Thompson’s initially similar protagonists in “Traveler” and “The Kentucky Derby” can affect their texts in different ways, depending on the narrator’s approach.

Though John Hellmann suggests in *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* that Thompson presents his facts through a distorted vision, and that this vision causes a flattened and warped image of reality because it is openly presented as the product of a flattened and warped mind, the five protagonists discussed in this thesis show that Thompson does *not* use a singular vision (69). In accordance with the demand for literary thickness, the content of Thompson’s protagonists are entirely dependent on the form through which they are depicted. Though it may be possible to trace elements of Thompson’s past or his personal experiences in his texts, the assumption of one recurring main character would be ignoring their drastically contrasting portrayals and functions in the narrative. As such, the reader has to allow for a separation of narrator and protagonist.

Similarly, by distancing Thompson from both narrator and protagonist, the reader is forced to consider the presumption that the protagonist is a recurring character. Throughout the texts, there are multiple minor incongruences and contradictory chronological statements which would suggest they are not the same – how can The Journalist’s claim of not having been in Louisville for ten years be true if he six years previously was a “city boy” with

Louisville plates in Renfro Valley? Suzanne Ferguson would answer that this is done by the reader's need for coherence, that combined with "our intuitive knowledge of "storiness" with a symbolic reading of the actual events and characters, we find the narrative element in the works and perceive them as short stories rather than random accounts of unrelated characters and elements" (294). In other words, just as Thompson "perceives and imposes [a] pattern on the world around him," so does the reader impose pattern on his texts. Thompson's readers "seek to bring order out of chaos," and when his text "imitates the surface disorder of the world," the reading of a recurrent protagonist ignores smaller discrepancies for an overall understanding (Thompson 372, Ferguson 294).

## 1.2 Thompson vs. the World

Literary fiction, according to McGregor, makes it impossible to speak of literary characters in general; rather we, as readers, are forced to consider their function in the narrative and what aspect they are presented through. As demonstrated this is required in terms of Thompson's protagonists, and I will now analyse and compare the construction of Jean-Claude Killy from "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy" and Ernest Hemingway from "What Lured Hemingway to Ketchum," to see how Thompson's literary approach results in portrayals which are impossible to distance from the narrator's functions.

The two texts initially appear different both in length and in importance in Thompson's literary legacy<sup>4</sup>. McKeen and Wolfe both highlight "The Temptations" as one of the founding texts for the dawning Gonzo-style. Providing Thompson with his first publication in *Scanlan's*

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<sup>4</sup> In favour of this in-depth study of technique there will be no greater analysis of the texts themselves. Nevertheless, it would be a dereliction of duty to neglect their status in the Thompson canon, and to give an explanation for their selection.

*Monthly* after an initial rejection from *Playboy*, it was published in March 1970, two months before his “gonzo-breakthrough” with “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”. “What Lured”, meanwhile, has so far been widely ignored by critics. First published in the *National Observer* in 1964, McKean mentions but dismisses it as “part travelogue, part literary criticism and part elegy” (24).

However, in the discussion of Thompson’s literary approach, both texts provide extensive proof of the literary thickness in his oeuvre. As their titles allude to, both texts concern a known celebrity, and as such could be assumed to follow the norms of the portrait interview. However, Thompson deliberately plays and subverts the standards expected, with both “The Temptations” and “What Lured” going on to explicitly state their goals as outside the realm of journalism. In “What Lured” this may be natural, as the text was written three years after Hemingway’s suicide, with the narrator of the text justifying his endeavour by declaring how “the newspaper never answered *those questions* – not for me, at any rate” (391, italics added). “Those questions” are similarly his preoccupations in “The Temptations,” which, as McKean writes, is an article “about his [the journalist’s] inability to develop a story from a superficial character” (36). As the journalist expresses in exasperation during a discussion with Killy’s press officer: “all I want to do is talk to the man, in a decent human manner, and find out what he thinks about things” (99). Whereas “What Lured” is underappreciated as an example of Thompson’s occasionally understated tone, “The Temptations” is more in line with the frantic pace and diction which would later be regarded as a defining characteristic of his “Gonzo-journalism”. Both texts are however defined by how the characters are impossible to distance from Thompson’s literary approach.

According to Thompson’s stance, the reason why “those questions” remain unanswered is because the traditionally required distance of a reporter to his subject fails to give the insight desired. As Thom Wolfe puts it, the accepted goal was for the journalist to provide “a “neutral

background” against which “bits of colour would stand out [...] Understatement was the thing” (17). However, the result of such an approach had led to newspapers failing to answer “those questions” in regards to Hemingway, and, as McKeen points out, due to Killy’s inherently distanced and uninterested character, “writing a straightforward profile of Killy would have made an excruciatingly dull piece of journalism” (36).

What I would argue Thompson does instead is to employ fictional and literary techniques to bring out and develop sides to characters so as to, to quote E.L Doctorow, “mediate the world with the purpose of introducing meaning” (qtd in Hutchinson 480). In other words, in order to understand his subject, Thompson’s narrator uses their background to construct a character whose motivations and actions are understandable to the reader – despite the fact that they need not necessarily correspond to their real-life counterpart. In reference to McGregor’s earlier definition of literary thickness as a demand for form and content to be inseparable, Thompson’s portrayal makes it impossible to speak of either “Hemingway” or “Killy” in general terms; rather, as we shall see below, we are forced to read them as “Hemingway-in-Thompson” and “Killy-in-Thompson”.

### 1.2.1. **Introducing the literary**

In defining “literary thickness,” McGregor uses the example of the historical figure of André Marty in Hemingway’s *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. According to McGregor, the existence of a real-life Marty is nevertheless distanced from the character in the novel of the same name due to the latter’s role and depiction in the text. Contrasting the depiction of Marty-in-Hemingway with a depiction of Marty in Anthony Beevor’s biographical study of the Spanish Civil War, McGregor emphasizes the function of Marty’s character in Hemingway’s narrative. Rather

than supposing *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to be a work of non-fiction, the inclusion of Marty, and the reader's presumed knowledge and familiarity with his real life persona and reputation, only increases the emotional effect of the meeting between Andrés, with whom the reader's sympathy lies, and Marty at a critical point in the narrative. The introduction of Marty thereby ends up adding rather than diminishing the literary effect of the text, according to McGregor heightening "the tension and sense of danger" (11). This leads to a literary text which, whilst not as factually or historically neutral or accurate as Beevor's, nevertheless impacts the reader at a more emotional level.

In "What Lured Hemingway to Ketchum," and "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy," Thompson achieves the same effect by doing the opposite: in texts on real-life people he introduces the literary sphere and blurs the distinction between real life and fiction to augment the emotional impact. This is natural in relation to Hemingway, a person whose interest to the reader might be expected to lie in his literary life, but of the two characters presented in these two texts, it is Killy who gets the most explicit comparison to a literary character. Presented at first as a supremely successful athlete turned salesman, his apparently impeccable façade is first questioned through a paragraph-long comparison with Jay Gatsby, quoted here in its entirety:

Jean-Claude, like Jay Gatsby, has "one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced -- or seemed to face -- the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey." That description of Gatsby by Nick Carraway -- of Scott, by Fitzgerald -- might just as well be of J.-C. Killy, who also fits the rest of

it: "Precisely at that point [Gatsby's smile] vanished -- and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. . ."

The point is not to knock Killy's English, which is far better than my French, but to emphasize his careful, finely coached choice of words. (81)

In a text concerning a successful athlete first written for *Playboy Magazine* it is remarkable – and yet consistent – to note that Thompson turns to literary symbols and tropes. Through this symbolic presentation the narrator is able to describe the protagonist's view of Killy's perceived double personality, and the difficulty of manoeuvring through the apparently superficial façade in order to "talk to the man, in a decent human manner" (91). By a comparison to Gatsby, the reader is given the sense of understanding Killy as well as recognizing the perceived difficulty of the protagonist's ambition; judging Killy-as-salesman to be Jay Gatsby, the protagonist simultaneously accredits Killy's skiing persona as his "true" identity – his James Gatz. "Between training sessions at Grenoble [just before the 1968 Olympics]" the narrator describes how "he [Killy] talked like a character out of some early Hemingway sketch, shrugging blankly at the knowledge that he was coming to the end of the only thing he knew" (82). Making literary references to quintessential American literary icons allows the reader an emotional understanding of Killy that the protagonist is struggling to get from Killy himself – as well as undermining it, by his presentation of Killy as a superficial character. As Thompson concludes, by returning to Gatsby:

It is hard to honor him [Killy] for whatever straight instincts he still cultivates in private -- while he mocks them in public, for huge amounts of money. The echo of Gatsby's style recalls the truth that Jimmy Gatz was really just a rich crook and a booze salesman. But Killy is not Gatsby. He is a bright young Frenchman with a completely original act.



... and a pragmatic frame of reference that is better grounded, I suspect, than my own. He is doing pretty well for himself, and nothing in his narrow, high-powered experience can allow him to understand how I can watch his act and say that it looks, to me, like a very hard dollar-- maybe the hardest (96).

Though it describes Jimmy Gatz as a “rich crook,” the comparison does not lead to antagonising Killy, rather it allows for an understanding and a pity for Killy’s fall from his former grace. Despite his economic gain, the fictive perspective Thompson includes allows for the development of an aspect that would have been difficult to portray with capitalist objectivity. “Killy is not Gatsby,” Thompson states, as he gained his popularity through great sporting achievements, but through the two direct quotations he has nevertheless dotted a character-arc whose tragic progression is immediately apparent to the reader.

In “What Lured Hemingway to Ketchum” the protagonist is in a reversed position: with Hemingway dead for the past four years, his mission is to construct an arc leading up to and explaining the eventual outcome. The presence of Hemingway’s work is inescapably affecting everything the narrator relays, even when not discussing the texts themselves. All the descriptions of people and places of Ketchum described by the narrator are based on their connections to Hemingway himself, and, in turn, to his professional output. This includes Charley Mason, who after an opening quote of ““when Ernie had a few drinks in him he could carry on for hours with his stories. It was better than reading his books,”” is later made reference to by the protagonist as to how “as he talked, I had an odd feeling that he was somehow a creation of Hemingway’s, that he had escaped from one of the earlier short stories” (371, 372). The deliberate naming is similarly used to evoke the literary legend of Hemingway, as he is referred to in the narrative as “America’s most famous writer,” “Papa,” and “Ernie” (370-71).

Even when discussing the texts, there is an unspoken understanding that Hemingway's work as a writer is encompassing and embodying all aspects of Hemingway as a man. Whereas the protagonist of "The Temptations" speaks to Killy himself, Hemingway is heard via his own work, and the works of writers of a similar standing: "Ketchum was Hemingway's Big Two Hearted River, and he wrote his own epitaph in the story of the same name, just as Scott Fitzgerald had written his epitaph in a book called *The Great Gatsby*" (373). Not only does the comparison to Fitzgerald cement Hemingway in the upper tier of American novelists, it also defines the relationship between man and work. Hemingway, as presented in this text, uses his background and writes according to the "power of his convictions" and in moving to Ketchum, "most people assumed he was working, against what he knew would be his last deadline, on the long-promised novel" (372, 379). Defining how "the function of art is supposedly to bring order out of chaos," the conclusive revelation that Hemingway's last novel fails to live up to expectations by being a nostalgic fantasy about Paris in the 1920s, implies that the "multitude of grey shadings" that is modernity has proven too much chaos for Hemingway to make sense of (372-73). Portrayed as a classic tragic hero, Hemingway's failure of moving on, of not being able to accept a changing world, ends up being his tragic flaw in this narrative.

By placing Hemingway in a literary setting, the reader is able to empathise with his struggle to progress after previous achievements. Despite wildly different characters on the surface, Thompson's portrayal of both Killy and Hemingway thereby allows his readers an emotional understanding of their situations. Whilst still based on actual people, a movement into the literary sphere allows him to develop new aspects, and having first introduced the literary, he then goes on to fully utilize it.

### 1.2.2 Symbols and similes: literary tropes applied

Having opened his portrayals to literary tropes, Thompson employs multiple, explicitly literary tools to help flesh out his characters. With Hemingway, Thompson turns to nature, and introduces a simile between Hemingway and the natural landscape surrounding Ketchum as a way of enhancing his portrayal of a man with preference for simplicity and a black-and-white world view. Starting with the neighbour's quote about how he was scared "America's most famous writer" might be killed by a car – in itself a symbol of the modern age and, therefore, "a terrible way for him to go" – the narrator moves on to describe the setting: Hemingway's empty house is "built on a hillside looking down on the Big Wood River and out across the valley at the Sawtooth Mountains" (370-71). Contrasting the serene location of the small Idaho community are Hemingway's past experiences in Cuba, which eventually "blew up around him like a volcano" (371). It is remarked how tourists come to steal earth from Hemingway's grave, and towards the end Hemingway is described as doing his best work "when he was standing on something solid – like an Idaho mountainside, or a sense of conviction" (373). Using this simile not only helps describe the character, it also allows for using a symbolic and metaphoric understanding of Hemingway's surroundings.

Early in the text, the narrator explicitly asks "what was he doing living there [Ketchum, Idaho]?" This question is later answered by stating how Hemingway had returned to Ketchum, as the narrator understands it "to see clear and as a whole" (371). Ketchum is a symbol of Hemingway's glorious past and his preference for simplicity, described as "perhaps the only place that had not changed radically since the good years" (371). "Only Ketchum had remained unchanged," the narrator presupposes, simultaneously answering the question he previously posed whilst strengthening his portrayal of Hemingway as struggling to keep up with the

complexities of modern life (371). The narrator is guiding the reader to an emotional understanding that so far bases itself solely on the literary output of Hemingway and descriptions of the city of Ketchum.

Similarly, as the ultimate outcome is available to both reader and protagonist, elements of foreshadowing are applied retrospectively. Though explicitly stated as dead and spoken about in the past tense, the narrator contributes quotes and events to changes in Hemingway, which not only gives credence to all aspects given, but constructs a character arc fitting with future events, making them seem predictable. This is done via symbols, such as when explaining that Hemingway's "favourite time was the fall," followed a page later with a description of Hemingway as having been "in the winter of his years" (371-72). Later, the narrator contrasts two quotes to show the decline of Hemingway, the first coming via the character of Charley Mason on how to break through in the literary life, to which Hemingway answers "'there's only one thing I live by – that's having the power of conviction and knowing what to leave out'" (372). This is opposed to another written Hemingway quote from another setting, which states "'something happens to our good writers at a certain age [...] we destroy them in many ways'" (370). Both these quotes use dramatic language of life and death and link them with Hemingway's writing. The literary language of "What Lured" simultaneously describes Hemingway, through symbols and metaphors, as the same time as guiding a psychological understanding in which his death becomes the natural conclusion.

Contrastingly, the literary language of "The Temptations" highlights precisely why the protagonist *doesn't* understand Killy. Refusing to accept him as the symbol of American capitalism, every meeting in a public and commercial setting highlights not only the cynically capitalist image Killy presents but ironically undercuts it: "Killy's hard-sell scenes no longer surprised me, but finding him trapped in a beer and hotdog gig was like wandering into some housing-project kaffeeklatsch and finding Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis making a straight-faced

pitch for Folger's instant-brewed" (78). Rather than accept Killy as a symbol of commercial America, the protagonist seems to almost pity what he regards as an attempt to appear as a cynical front figure, commenting on how "he seemed overly polite, very concerned with saying the right thing, like an Ivy League business school grad doing well on his first job interview -- confident, but not quite sure" (80).

Helped by Killy's initials, the narrator's persistent use of the J-C (Jean-Claude) abbreviation, and the leading title, builds up this image of the false prophet. Despite elaborations as to why Killy is such a successful promoter, the protagonist refuses to buy into Killy as a symbol of salvation for the sale of American automobiles, commenting instead on how

He [Killy] often sounds like a prisoner of war, dutifully repeating his name, rank and serial number. . . and smiling, just as dutifully, fixing his interrogator with that wistful, distracted sort of half-grin that he knows is deadly effective because his handlers have showed him the evidence in a hundred press-clippings. The smile has become a trademark. It combines James Dean, Porfirio Rubirosa and a teen-age bank clerk with a foolproof embezzlement scheme.

Killy projects an innocence and shy vulnerability that he is working very hard to overcome (79)

As such, the conclusion the narrator draws is that "Killy is a good soldier: he takes orders well and he learns quickly. He would rise through the ranks in any army. Killy reacts; thinking is not his gig" (96). By building up Killy's persona as two-dimensional, Thompson's literary approach to the portrayal simultaneously reveals how staged the public image of Killy actually is. As such, McGregor's definition of literary thickness of form and content being inseparable

is applicable to Killy-in-Thompson specifically because this portrayal reveals and mocks the fictional persona of Killy-in-public. Compared to Thompson's comments in "What Lured" of how the "purpose of art is supposedly to bring order out of chaos," it is evident that in the case of Killy there is too much controlled order, and thus Thompson uses art – through literary tropes such as symbolism and metaphors – to give a sense, or glimpse, of the original chaos instead (372).

### 1.2.3 Dialogues & facets

Part of what distinguishes Thompson's texts is that despite the provocative and often volatily demanding voice of the narrator, they nevertheless avoid becoming monologic in the sense Mikhail Bakhtin employs the term, whereby they present themselves and pretend "to be *the ultimate word*" (293). Rather than claiming to own "the ultimate word," Thompson's texts, by giving value and credence to multiple, contradictory voices, seek to give *an* interpretation, constructing a character to fit the different facets of his subjects, which are visible to different people at different times (Bakhtin 293). Through a multifaceted sense of truth, Thompson validates otherwise contradictory statements, portraying a character which, whilst inseparable from the text, still fits with the personal experiences of secondary characters. As a result, the dialogues in Thompson simultaneously function as descriptions of the characters, and as a way of understanding their motives and intentions – by giving the reader direct access to his sources, Thompson guides the reader to his eventual conclusion.

The opening scene to "The Temptations" illustrates how Thompson uses dialogue as a method of revealing character, this time aided by Bill Cardoso of the *Boston Globe*. The two first meet Killy by walking in on a meeting between Killy and the "Head Ski people [...]"

perhaps thirty in all” (77). Beginning with an awestruck “Cardoso nudged me, whispering, ‘Jesus, there’s Killy’”, the scene ends with Cardoso declaring “‘What an incredible scene! What was he *doing* with those bums?’” (78). This dialogue confirms Killy’s high and reputable standing, as well as illustrating why the protagonist senses a distance between the man and his current work. As the text progresses, the protagonist struggles with the multiple aspects of Killy, partly because of Killy’s own reluctance to participate in what the protagonist frustratingly states as a desire to “talk to the man, in a decent human manner, and find out what he thinks about things” (91). The first time this is attempted, it results in an unrelayed conversation from which we are only given Killy’s final summation: “You and me, we are completely different. We are not the same kind of people! You don't understand!” (79).

Part of the problem of their communication no doubt stems from the protagonist’s similar reluctance to meet Killy on what is portrayed as his preferred terms. Throughout the text we are given sections of dialogue which highlight how detached Killy is from what is being said, and how he is being regarded as a symbolic commodity. In the following two extracts, where the first is from a discussion between the protagonist and Killy’s manager and the second between Killy himself and Len Roller, a Chevrolet PR agent, the focus is on how artificial this character is. I quote these two extended extracts not solely to give the reader a feel of Thompson’s original text, but to illustrate how infused the use of dialogue is in Thompson’s characterisations:

‘Naturally, you'll be discreet,’ he told me.

‘About what?’

‘You know what I mean.’ He smiled. “Jean-Claude has his private life and I'm sure you won't want to embarrass him or anyone else -- including yourself, I might add -- by violating confidence.”

‘Well. . . certainly not,’ I replied, flashing him a fine eyebrow shrug to cover my puzzlement. He seemed pleased, and I glanced over at Killy, who was chatting amiably with DeLorean, saying, ‘I hope you can ski with me sometime at Val d’Isère.’

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On the way in, Roller had rehearsed Jean-Claude on the Q. and A. sequence: ‘Okay, then I’ll say, ‘I see an interesting looking car over there, Jean-Claude -- can you tell us something about it?’ And then you say. . . what?’

J.-C.: ‘Oh, yes, that is my car, the new Z-28. It has seat covers made of Austrian ski sweaters. And you notice my special license plate, JCK. . .’

Roller: ‘That’s fine. The important thing is to be spontaneous.’

J.-C. (puzzled): ‘Spuen-tan-EUS?’

Roller (grinning): ‘Don’t worry -- you’ll do fine.’ 86

Rather than describe his protagonist’s annoyance at Killy’s refusal to answer his questions, Thompson expresses these emotions through dialogue, and contrasts the goal and desires of Killy and his protagonist. Whereas the latter wants to “speak to the man,” both Killy and his representatives are presented as trying to make the protagonist’s interview congruent with the vision of Killy as the symbol of Chevrolet, with a smile “that has become trademark” (91, 79). The dialogue in this text is deliberately staged to give the reader a sense, not only of the construction of Killy as a symbol, but also of the discrepancies between Killy and the protagonist. By relaying direct quotations and validating Killy’s voice, Thompson is providing reference points from which *his* understanding of Killy originates, allowing the reader to share *his* vision of the man, rather than claiming it as the objectively true version.



In “What Lured,” he does the exact same thing, with a subject who, if the local bartender is to be believed, has become increasingly popular post-mortem: ““Why don't you do one [an article] on all the people who knew Hemingway? Sometimes I get the feeling I'm the only person in town who didn't”” (371). Despite the comedic value of this quote, it simultaneously forces the reader to be critical of the protagonist’s assessments and evaluations. With Hemingway dead, the protagonist engages both the local population and Hemingway’s own texts for dialogue which – as in “The Temptations” – is validated by the protagonist and part of how *his* understanding is formed. Consider the opening quote, given by “the neighbour”:

‘That poor old man. He used to walk out there on the road in the evenings. He was so frail and thin and old-looking that it was embarrassing to see him. I was always afraid a car would hit him, and that would have been an awful way for him to go. I was tempted to go out and tell him to be careful.’ 369

This is the opening paragraph to the story, giving the reader an image of Hemingway as old and frail. In a story relayed later on in the text by “Charley Mason, a wandering pianist,” Hemingway is given a very different portrayal (371):

‘He was a hell of a drinker,’ ... ‘I remember one time over at the Tram [a local pub] just a few years ago; he was with two Cubans [...] One afternoon when I was there, Hemingway jerked the chequered cloth off the table and he and the other big guy took turns making the little doctor play the bull. They'd whirl and jerk the cloth around -- it was a hell of a sight.’ 372

The contrasting image of Hemingway in these dialogues does not discredit the validity of either source as much as it effectuates the portrayal of Hemingway as a man of multitudes, underlining how his vitality was waning and how his persona was torn between the grandeur of the past and the frailty of the future. This conflict of progression is explicitly pointed out by “Chuck Atkinson, owner of a Ketchum motel,” stating first how Hemingway “was a fine shot, even towards the end when he was sick,” and secondly how *A Moveable Feast* “sounded more like him than some of the other stuff” (371). The protagonist’s elaborate and persistent naming of Hemingway as “Papa,” and “America’s greatest writer” are reflected by how these secondary characters similarly had their own interpretations and understanding of Hemingway (370-71). The characters the protagonist engages are regarded as voices – or “carrier of ideas,” in Bakhtin’s terminology – whose vision of Hemingway are inherently as valid as what Thompson presents (79).

In an interview concerning the different viewpoints of the same event in *Absalom, Absalom!* William Faulkner comments that, “I think that no one individual can look at truth [...] You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact” (University of Virginia). Thompson’s solution to this multiplicity is to offer the reader one subjective understanding of truth. Rather than claiming to own “the ultimate word” of a monologue - as journalism does by regarding itself as giving “the full objective description” – he portrays an open-ended character based on the understanding formed by characters revealing several validated aspects (Bakhtin 293, Wolfe 21). In addition to the dialogues by his neighbours, Hemingway’s portrayal is constructed from a presumed congruence between man and work. Thompson attributes direct quotes from Hemingway’s work, and comments on his literary output, as a way of engaging Hemingway himself, and from these various subjective experiences and understandings shapes the character of “Hemingway-in-Thompson.”

Through the use of dialogue Thompson is not only highlighting the existence of multiple aspects, but by staging his approach to his sources he is also guiding the reader in the direction of his eventual conclusion, admitting outright the subjective understandings leading him to his portrayal of Hemingway. Thompson's protagonist does not, to quote Faulkner, claim to have "seen truth intact," but instead shows how *his* view – a voice in a larger dialogue – is constructed through the use of dialogues with different aspects (University of Virginia).

### 1.3 The Questions Answered and the Questions They Pose.

In his article "Should we read *Heart of Darkness*?" professor J.Hillis Miller summarizes Joseph Conrad's novel as "an attempt to "render justice," as Marlow puts it, to Kurtz, the man he meets at "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience"" (4). Though largely ignored by critics, Thompson had an immense respect and regard for Conrad which is often overlooked in favour of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. This oversight is perhaps particularly strange given how regularly and persistently the references occur: from *Hell's Angels* in 1966, via two references in "Fear and Loathing in Limbo: The Scum Also Rises" in 1974, to the "Author's Note" in 1979, to name but a few. Nor is Thompson shy of talking about Conrad, as in a 1977 interview with *High Times*, a pro-marijuana publication, he comments on how "I seem to be alone, for instance, in considering Joseph Conrad one of history's great humourists" (Rosenbaum 44). In regards to the portrayals of Jean-Claude Killy and Ernest Hemingway, I would argue Conrad's influence is visible. When the narrator explains that he sets out to answer "those questions" like "the newspapers never did," or defiantly refuses to accept the commercial PR-Killy in favour of the skier, he does so precisely in an attempt to "render justice" to his subjects (370).

I will suggest that in contrast to the New Journalists' use of adding literary techniques to journalism, it is through an appreciation of the merits and conventions of the literary approach that Thompson achieves this justified – or truthful – representation of his subjects. By leading Hemingway and Killy into the literary sphere, Thompson is able to use metaphors, symbols and a dialogic approach, to guide the reader to a conclusive image. After the discussions with his neighbours and friends and various descriptions all regarding his professional work, Hemingway is finally described as “an old, sick and very troubled man, and the illusion of peace and contentment was not enough for him” (373). Judging Hemingway solely through the lens of his literary output, the narrator portrays the character as someone who has lost “that power of conviction,” and, though he was being “destroyed” like ““our good writers,”” “he never understood how to avoid it” (372, 370). Killy, similarly, is, according to Winston, portrayed as a “victim,” “exploited” by the system he’s been engaged in (411). Ending the story with how Killy’s “act [...] looks, to me, like a very hard dollar-- maybe the hardest,” Thompson concludes a piece that has not sought to demonize or critique Killy, but rather pity him for what is perceived as a sad fall from grace, from former world champion to PR puppet (104). As Winston puts it, the critique is more of the American system Killy has been trapped by, rather than of Killy’s actions, “even if [Killy’s] activities may be personally corrupting” (409). The reader is not, ultimately, asked to loath or critique Killy for the lack of insight into his life and views, but rather pity his inability to share or even preserve this part of himself.

Has Thompson then managed to “render justice” or answered “those questions”? In regards to Hemingway, he has portrayed a character whose end was the natural conclusion, whereas his efforts to portray Killy results in a deeper understanding of his situation, if not the man himself. However, at the cost of this deeper understanding, I would argue that in the process of “rendering justice” Thompson utilises literary techniques and adapts fictional

approaches to such an extent we can no longer speak of Ernest Hemingway or Jean-Claude Killy in general, but as “Hemingway-in-Thompson” and “Killy-in-Thompson.”

In essence, the subjectivity of Thompson’s techniques is simultaneously what gives the characters (both his protagonists and his journalistic subjects) their personality, and what forces the texts from journalism to literature. As McKeen writes, “a straightforward profile of Killy would have made an excruciatingly dull piece of journalism,” and so Thompson abandons the “neutral background” Wolfe referred to as the journalist’s starting-point, resulting in a portrayal which is as much affected by the protagonists’ approach as the subject’s behaviour (McKean 36, Wolfe 17). Hemingway, meanwhile, is reconstructed three years after his death through a series of interpreted dialogues and analogous views of the relationship between man, location and work. Given these caveats, the question remains whether or not the portrayals are still truthful; whether they do, indeed, render justice to their subjects or not.

The first and most critical aspect to consider in this regard is in the relation between truth and fiction, for, as Lamarque and Olsen comments in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*: “being made (or made up) and being true are not logically incompatible. [...] Indeed it is possible to make up a story with the intention to deceive while inadvertently speaking the whole truth” (17). In the case of Killy and Hemingway this means that although Thompson’s narrator draws conclusions based upon unreliable or subjectively interpreted evidence, his conclusions are not automatically untruthful. In other words, though he may veer off into the realm of fiction, Thompson may yet have given accurate portrayals of both Hemingway and Killy. What the Lamarque and Olsen quote fails to recognize in their phrasing of “inadvertently telling the whole truth” however, is whether or not this is possible in the first place.

In *Writings in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure concludes that, “in linguistics we are forbidden to speak of ‘a thing’ from different points of view, or a thing in

general, because it's just the point of view that MAKES the thing” (201, original emphasis). Throughout his authorship, Thompson’s rejection of objective narration illustrates a firm belief in the same idea. By prefacing *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* with a T.S Eliot quote claiming that “Between the Idea and the Reality ... Falls the Shadow,” the awareness of subjective interpretation is persistently highlighted for the reader. Consider again this quote from another of Thompson’s literary heroes, William Faulkner:

I think that no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. (University of Virginia)

The inability to report “the whole truth” is not a reporter’s failure; rather it is an acceptance of how truth works and is constructed. As Linda Hutchinson describes the nonfictional novels of the sixties, their goal was greater than just seeking to “embrace the fictional element inevitable in any reporting,” to “imagine its ‘way toward the truth,’” on a far more political level the writers sought to “seriously question who determined and created this truth” (485). In regards to Hemingway we see Thompson elaborating a past through fictional elements, whereas Killy exemplifies the outright rejection of the presented truth. In an attempt to render justice to his subjects, a writer accepting Saussure and Faulkner’s view of truth as a multi-faceted subjective experience determined by point of view would be misleading his readers by portraying truth as objective and conclusive; rather the truthful rendition would be realized through a full disclosure of his subjective experience. With Bakhtin’s notion of monologism as claiming “the ultimate word,” Thompson’s dialogism allows and argues for multiple interpretations (293). In this understanding, Thompson’s use of fiction is merely a result of an understanding that, to

quote Hutchinson again, “there are only truths in the plural, and never one truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just other truths” (479).

The final, and perhaps essential point relevant to this chapter’s discussion is what *value* there may be in Thompson’s literary approach. One has already been touched upon: the view of truth as multifaceted demands a writer’s acknowledgement of his subjective restraints in order to prevent him from misleading or even deceiving his readers. The other lies in how the writer, through this acknowledgement, is able to find answers to “those questions.” In “What Lured” Thompson explicitly states that, “the function of art is to bring order out of chaos” (372). This quote is particularly relevant to his own work, not only because it admits to an inherently chaotic existence, but the act itself of representing the world has to be changed to fit what the artist sees. Hutchinson attributes Doctorow with the notion of “mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning,” and I will argue that through a subjective and literary approach to his subjects Thompson manages, in these two portrayals, to offer meaningful insights into the human condition by rejecting “the straight-forward portrait” and the “exceedingly dull piece of journalism” this would have resulted in (Hutchinson 480, McKeen 36).

Of course, this notion of fictional value is not new: Aristotle comments on the same in his *Poetics*, stating how “the historian could only speak of what happened, of the particulars of the past; the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals” (qtd in Hutchinson 475). In this regard, Thompson (and the New Journalists in general) were not as revolutionary in their approach as they may initially have seemed, rather their re-introduction of fiction into 20<sup>th</sup> century journalism highlights the value of literature. In the following chapter I will look at how these thoughts converge in two other of Thompson’s texts, and allows a reading of the “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and “A Footloose American in a Smugglers’ Den” that acknowledges the literary

merits of the texts. Not only does a literary reading of “The Kentucky Derby” and “A Footloose American” widen the scope of Thompson oeuvre, but through their thematic concerns they assiduously force the reader to consider who claims the societal authority of truth.



## Chapter 2: “The best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism...”

*“In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story”*

- J.M Coetzee, *Foe*

In discussing Thompson’s thematic concerns, it may initially seem that all his texts essentially deal with the circumstances of the text’s very creation. As McKeen succinctly puts it, what characterises Thompson’s journalism is how “getting the story *is* the story” (35). However, by borrowing the first half of Thompson’s frequent Faulkner quotation for the title of this chapter, I will show what aspects of an event fiction is better suited to relay than journalism. If “the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism,” then what this chapter aims to do is to explain how Thompson’s own texts’ illustrate this point.

What I will do is, in accordance with literary critics J. Hillis Miller, Derek Attridge, Rafe McGregor and Stein Haugom Olsen & Peter Lamarque, to approach these texts as literature, and, by adopting the literary stance, try to bring to the fore the literary value contained in what I will consider two short-stories, rather than works of journalism. What’s more, through the depth and reach of Thompson’s philosophical and political themes revealed in this reading, I will show that these are texts that *demand* to be read as literature. In chapter 1 I looked at how Thompson’s approach to portraying characters made the texts literary. In “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” and “A Footloose American in a

Smuggler's Den," he combines literary characters in stories concerning the creation of truth and the value of subjectivity.

The example of two texts of course makes it difficult to assert or accept general statements about Thompson's overall oeuvre, yet the texts were conclusively chosen as representative due to their completing and contrasting features. The first, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" is a comparatively long text and one that has been frequently critiqued and highlighted as Thompson's breakthrough. However, despite extensive writing, it has as of yet not been analysed as literature, defined instead as "the quintessential Hunter S. Thompson article [...] it is the best short-form version of gonzo" (McKeen 39). This is perhaps the only initial comparison it appears to have with "A Footloose American in a Smuggler's Den." Much shorter and written much earlier in Thompson's career, it is only briefly mentioned in McKeen as an example of proto-gonzo, which "after three paragraphs of Hemingwayesque introduction [...] turns into a classic bit of comic Thompson" (18).

My eventual choice however, was not due to this small overlap of journalistic style, but in their rather how clearly they are linked when read as literature. Rather than the other considered texts being unsuitable for a comparison, the choice was hence made to illustrate the unmistakable but as-yet undrawn connections in initially distinctively dissimilar texts. Despite their apparent differences there are, once apprehended on literature's terms, clear evidence of Thompson's ongoing study of the value and role of fiction, and the creation of a personal, subjective truth as opposed to the reporting of an objective one. A final, key, attribute shared by these texts are their chronological relation to Thompson's career; as with most of the texts featured and analysed in this thesis they are written either before or just as his position as the "Duke of Gonzo" had been manifested. As such, with Thompson himself unaware of this title and its content during the production of the following texts, it would be a violation for us, as readers, to take such prejudices with us in our approach.

## 2.1 We can do without your kind in Kentucky <sup>5</sup>

Introductory I gave brief reference to “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” as being “the Birth of Gonzo,” and mentioned how most critical writing on Thompson highlights it as being one of his crowning achievements. McKeen calls it “the best short-form version of Gonzo,” and it is one of the two texts included in Wolfe’s anthology *the New Journalism* (the other being an excerpt from *Hell’s Angels*) (39). It is the third text in *The Great Shark Hunt* and several reviewers singled it out as one of the better pieces in the book. Originally published in *Scanlan’s Monthly* in 1970 it is also significant in marking the first of many collaborations with Ralph Steadman, the English illustrator, whose style is now immediately synonymous with Thompson.

Unlike Thompson’s greatest literary commercial success, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “The Kentucky Derby” is regarded, by the author as well as critics, as a *successful* attempt at Gonzo. Whereas *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* lacked the essential immediacy in the writing-process Thompson was after, “The Kentucky Derby” claimed, in its original by-line, to have been “written under duress by Hunter S. Thompson and sketched with eyebrow pencil and lipstick by Ralph Steadman” (Elborough 9). Thompson would in a later *Playboy* interview describe the creation of “The Kentucky Derby” as “one of those horrible deadline scrambles” where he was running out of time to fill in “the horrible holes in the interviews” and ended up “jerking pages out of my notebook and numbering them and sending them to the printer” (Vetter). The result is a violently frenzied text that chronicles the troubles of a volatile journalist, or, as Wolfe describes him, a “frantic loser, inept and half psychotic,” and his efforts to cover the Kentucky Derby (172).

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<sup>5</sup> “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”, *Great Shark Hunt* 38

However, there are textual suggestions to doubt whether we should accept this description, principally and precisely because of the narration, which, as we shall see, is too displaced and removed – not to mention, *literary* – for a supposed gonzo-article. Compared to the ideal of “true *gonzo*,” defined by Thompson himself by a comparison to “a Cartier-Bresson photograph [...] no alterations in the darkroom, no cutting or cropping, no spotting ... no editing,” “The Kentucky Derby” is flawed (“Jacket Copy” 106). Instead of the immediacy and instantaneous objectivity of a photography, declaring *the* truth of a moment, what “The Kentucky Derby” ends up doing is to become hyper-subjective, with a temporally displaced narrator allowing for the construction of *a* complete story and version of events, rather than claiming “the ultimate word,” or “the full objective description” (Bakhtin 293, Wolfe 21).

### 2.1.1 Why Conrad?

In the before mentioned essay “Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*” J.Hillis Miller presents four ways in which he argues Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* invites a literary reading rather than an autobiographical or historical account<sup>6</sup>. I have previously highlighted Thompson’s oft ignored respect and interest in Conrad, and though the pairing might seem unlikely, there are demonstrable similarities between the two.

For one, notice how “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and *Heart of Darkness* appear to have multiple structural similarities. The basic plots are, in a condensed version, essentially the same: they revolve around an outsider (Marlow in Conrad, Steadman in Thompson) arriving to meet a journalist (Kurtz in Conrad, the Journalist in Thompson) in a

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<sup>6</sup> In face of accusations from critics claiming both the novel and its author as being racist, imperialistic and Eurocentric, Hillis Miller argues for a separation of author and text and why the text *demand*s a literary reading.

foreign land known for its savagery. As in the terrible scenes foreboded in Thompson, Marlow notes that he has been transported to a place where “pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist – obviously – in the sunshine” (Conrad 119). In this savage environment the journalist is not only comfortable, but has also taken to employing methods otherwise considered to be unsound. In Thompson we are early on given the protagonist’s fraudulent use of his *Playboy* tag and the repeated threats of use of mace, whereas Kurtz’ dealings with the natives have been of such a nature as to warrant the discussions of a hanging (Conrad 67-68). The outsider nevertheless grows to sympathize with the journalist, even when it becomes apparent that in spite of their savage surroundings they themselves are the worst offenders, such as the scene when the protagonist in “The Kentucky Derby” decides to open his can of mace in a crowded restaurant. The stories end with the journalist proclaiming a damning verdict of the “adventures of his soul upon this earth,” with Kurtz’ “the horror, the horror!” echoed by Thompson’s protagonist’s “horrible, horrible” (Conrad 141-42, Thompson 37).

As journalists, the two characters’ work share further similarities. At the latter stages of *Heart of Darkness* we learn that “the International Society of Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted him [Kurtz] with the making of a report, for its future guidance” (102). This report is explicitly stated in the novel as being 17 pages, and culminates with the famous postscript of “exterminate all the brutes!” (103). Reprinted without Steadman’s illustrations, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” covers 15 pages in the first edition of *The Great Shark Hunt*, with the title carrying a similar theme in a parallel three-letter alliteration, and the final postscript echoing Kurtz sentiments: “We can do without your kind in Kentucky” (38).

Conrad’s description of *Heart of Darkness* as “a wild story of a journalist who becomes manager of a station in the interior and makes himself worshipped by a tribe of savages” begins to suggest Thompson’s fascination with his works (Rubery 762). Both authors similarly seem

to have had problems with what Conrad coined “the necessarily atmosphereless, perspectiveless manner of the daily papers which somehow, for a man possessed of some historic sense, robs them of all real interest” (qtd. in Rubery 754). However, more than mere ideological correlations, perhaps the most significant point of comparison is in how critics have used the authors’ backgrounds to misattribute angles and readings of their work, including identifying Conrad with Marlow. (White & Finston 87).

From a literary perspective, however, what is most interesting is how Thompson can be seen to adopt the themes of Conrad’s work. *Heart of Darkness* has by critics been called “one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all of literature,” with Conrad himself referring to it as “some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth” (Hochschild 146). As I will go on to explain, both the sordidly farcical elements and the scathing indictments are carried over in Thompson. The one key difference between them is how, by telling the story from the viewpoint of the journalist, Thompson is able go further in depth in the process of corruption, as well as the result and final realization. In Conrad, Marlow describes how the dying Kurtz had “made the last stride, he had stepped over the edge, whereas I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot ... I had peeped over the edge,” (143-44). In “The Kentucky Derby,” what we are given is a first-hand account of the view from this edge, this threshold, beyond the “veil,” and why it matters to reveal it.

### 2.1.2 Thompson & the Journalist

In chapter 1 I compared the opening to “The Kentucky Derby” with the opening paragraph to “The Traveler,” and highlighted how initially similar protagonists were employed to different means in their respective narratives. The Journalist in “The Kentucky Derby” is not

representative of the “city-boy” culture as the protagonist of “The Traveler,” rather his motives reveal him as a member of the suburbanite middle-classes, and in having him re-enact *Heart of Darkness* creates a text which violently critiques the political landscape at the time. The racist implications in *Heart of Darkness* are all presented ironically, opening the European mind-set and society up to more criticism than its initial victims, with Hillis Miller stating how “these views are radically criticized and shown as what they are, that is, as elements in a deadly and unjust ideology” (13). As we will see, “The Kentucky Derby” explicitly attacks a similarly viewed hypocritical ideology.

Opening the story is the protagonist’s arrival at the Louisville airport, and an expositional dialogue to set the scene for the reader. After meeting Jimbo in the air-conditioned lounge, the protagonist relates, through Jimbo, what he, and, by extension, the reader, can expect from the Kentucky Derby:

Early on in our chat, Jimbo had told me that he hasn’t missed a Derby since 1954. ‘The little lady won’t come any more,’ he said. ‘She just grits her teeth and turns me loose for this one. And when I say “loose” I mean *loose!* I toss ten-dollar bills around like they were goin’ outa style! Horses, whiskey, women ... shit, there’s women in this town that’ll do anything for money (27)

From Jimbo’s descriptions it becomes apparent that the crowd are as much a part of the Kentucky Derby as the race itself, with clear norms and expectations to be adhered to. Jimbo is first introduced to the reader by “educating” the protagonist over the proper Derby weekend drink: “what the hell kinda drink is that [a Margarita with ice] for Kentucky Derby time?

What's *wrong* with you, boy?" and proceeds to threaten what might happen if our protagonist fails to learn from his mistakes:

“‘Look.’ He tapped me on the arm to make sure I was listening. ‘I know this Derby crowd, I come here every year, and let me tell you one thing I’ve learned – this is no town to be giving people the impression you’re some kind of faggot. Not in public anyway. Shit, they’ll roll you in a minute, knock you in the head and take every goddamn cent you have” (25).

These warnings appear to be directed more to the reader than the protagonist, who reveals himself as being perfectly prepared for the culture and “jaded, atavistic freakout” expected (27). Having first given Jimbo a story of how he is a *Playboy Magazine* photographer, he later explains how he bought the “very official” *Playboy* tag on his bag “from a pimp in Vail, Colorado, and he told me how to use it” (26). In the following paragraphs the narrator simultaneously characterises and compares the rambunctious Derby atmosphere to the protagonist’s character. Apart from being prepared for the Derby crowd and possessing a questionable morality, the opening section also features hints of the protagonist being politically aware, with references to uprisings, Nixon’s economic plans and the bombings of Cambodia, before suggesting that the protagonist is impulsive and spontaneous by showing rather than telling how he had neither rented a car nor lodgings in advance.

After receiving these initial warnings, our protagonist continues to spout out several of his own frightful expectations and predictions to Ralph Steadman. The character of Ralph Steadman, as he features in the article, is an Englishman visiting the country for the first time upon the protagonist’s request, to help cover the Kentucky Derby. As with Killy and Hemingway in “The Temptations” and “What Lured,” the aspect through which Steadman is



presented makes it impossible to distance the actual Steadman from Steadman-in-Thompson. His profession as an illustrator rather than photographer also helps underline the theme of the story: rather than give coverage of results and race events, the protagonist states how he is preoccupied with getting Steadman to sketch

that special kind of face that I felt we would need for the lead drawing. It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every Derby I'd ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry – a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture (31).

It is clear that the text is not presenting itself as a report on the 1970 Kentucky Derby. As the protagonist goes on to narrate, what he is after instead is “a symbol, in my own mind, of that whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is” (31). This leads to the actual events and winners being reduced to background action, and as Matthew Winston points out in his article “How do you like America?” on Thompson as sports journalist, “even the names of horses are without more than a token meaning” (412). The protagonist openly admits this in a scene in the press-box on the day before the race: “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 to watch the *real* beasts perform” (35).

Here we see how Thompson is using his characters to highlight the literary agenda of the text rather than the journalistic. According to Derek Attridge, one way to distinguish between literary and non-literary works lies in the possibility of a re-reading, and whereas with a non-literary work, such as a supposed article, a re-reading “is only worth doing if I fail to grasp the works argument, or I forget what I had gleaned the first time round,” reading a literary

work, “by contrast, is an affirmation of its literariness” (89). Part of the reason why “The Kentucky Derby” is enjoyable and allows for multiple read-throughs comes from the explicit shift of focus from the race to the hunt for the “*real* beasts.” The text is not preoccupied with the factual events of the race: these would be able to be reported by a single-shot photograph. Instead, the Journalist and his illustrator are after a subjective description of the decadent and depraved atmosphere experienced in a crowd of “beasts”.

Continuing Jimbo’s fear-mongering, the protagonist warns Steadman, and by extension, the reader, of the conduct of the “*real* beasts.” The nature of the Kentucky Derby crowd is represented in a comparison to horse breeding: after explaining that this is a practice dependent on calculated risk and careful supervision to avoid “very fast and also very crazy” offspring, our narrator lamentably notes the opposition this poses to how “the breeding of humans is not so wisely supervised, particularly in a narrow Southern society” (31). As such, he instructs Steadman to be aware “that almost everyone you talk to from now on will be drunk. People who might seem pleasant at first might suddenly swing at you for no reason at all” (31). Given this predicament, the narrator concludes that their best opportunity for survival appears to be to “relax and get drunk,” or, as Steadman puts it: “we’ll go native” (33).

As quoted in Travis Elborough’s post-scriptum section, Thompson would later admit that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was written to *simulate* the effects of serious drug use (11). Similarly, the following paragraph, previously quoted in chapter 1, distances the narrator from the protagonist and the text from straight journalism to literature through a temporal separation, indicating that the substance abuse in the text took place in the past, and therefore should not be affecting the text unless deliberately included:

My notes and recollections from Derby Day are somewhat scrambled. But now, looking at the big red notebook I carried all through that scene, I see more or less what happened. The book itself is somewhat mangled and bent; some of the pages are torn, others are shrivelled and stained by what appears to be whiskey, but taken as a whole, with sporadic memory flashes, they seem to tell the story. To wit: (33)

Even if the protagonist goes through the copious amounts of alcohol and lack of sleep suggested, the narrator, as revealed in this section, belongs to a different time when these factors should no longer be relevant – assuming the protagonist and narrator are congruent. The effects they would appear to have on the text will therefore have to be considered as being put there by deliberation, in order to create an effect. The displacement is further enhanced by the ending, with a conclusive “to wit:” denoting what is to come as a narration of a similarly mediated and literary kind. By Thompson’s own definition of *gonzo* as a spontaneous and immediate reporting without editing, the temporal distance displayed in this paragraph, paradoxically, contradicts his previous claim of “The Kentucky Derby” as a *gonzo*-piece<sup>7</sup>.

Despite being narrated in the first person, Hillis Miller suggests the events of *Heart of Darkness* are “ironized or suspended, presented implicitly in parabasis, by being presented as the speech of an imaginary character” (5). As such, Conrad should not be read as either one of the two framing narrators of *Heart of Darkness* “any more than Socrates in the Platonic texts in the Platonic dialogues is to be identified with Plato” (5). We should similarly avoid reading Thompson as the protagonist in “The Kentucky Derby.” Though clearly displaced temporally in the previous excerpt, nowhere is the displacement more visible than in the final section of the text:

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<sup>7</sup> This claim is further challenged by his admittance of how “it took me three weeks to write that Kentucky Derby story,” in “A Conversation on Ralph Steadman and his Book *America* with Dr. Hunter S. Thompson”.

Huge Pontiac Ballbuster blowing through traffic on the expressway. The journalist is driving, ignoring his passenger who is now nearly naked after taking off most of his clothing, which he holds out the window, trying to wind-wash the Mace out of it. [...]

The journalist rams the big car through traffic and into a spot in front of the terminal, then he reaches over to open the door on the passenger's side and shoves the Englishman out, snarling: "Bug off, you worthless faggot! You twisted pigfucker! [Crazed laughter.] If I weren't sick I'd kick your ass all the way to Bowling Green — you scumsucking foreign geek. Mace is too good for you .... We can do without your kind in Kentucky.

(38)

The distance between the narrator and the protagonist is underlined in this section, not only by the third person point-of-view, but with the clear irony of the crazed, final statement. These are not the words of the narrator, and less so those of Thompson, and any reader who chooses to interpret them as such does so, as Hillis Miller puts it, "at his or her own peril and in defiance of the most elementary literary conventions" (5). Instead, it is the final verdict of a journalist who, over the past few pages, has finally succumbed to *identifying* himself with the aforementioned "real beasts."

By identifying the protagonist as an unnamed journalist it is possible, as Winston suggests, to interpret "The Kentucky Derby" as a critique and illustration of how the text, by refusing to follow the normal patterns of sports journalism, highlights "some aspects of [...] structural problems with sports journalism" (407). However, I would argue that Winston, by still reading "the Kentucky Derby" as sports journalism, fails to see the greater implication of "the journalist."

To illustrate this, consider Stein Haugom Olsen and Peter Lamarque argument that “to appreciate a work is to recognize its value; specifically, to grasp the literary value of a literary work” (qtd in McGregor 2) Attridge refers to the same principle as “creative reading,” defining the purpose of reading literature as “an attempt to respond to the otherness, inventiveness, and singularity of the work,” (79). In the case of “The Kentucky Derby,” I would argue that it is not possible to recognize its singularity if we confine it to the restraints of journalism; a conclusive assessment of “The Kentucky Derby” as simply a non-standard report does not do it justice. Instead, what it forces the reader to do in order to fully appreciate it is to “adopt the literary stance” as Lamarque and Haugom Olsen writes, “to identify it as a literary work and apprehend it in accordance with the conventions of the literary practice, ” meaning the texts *demand*, to use Hillis Miller’s terminology, to be read as literature (qtd in McGregor 2).

By reading the story as a retelling of *Heart of Darkness*, the references to the protagonists’ upbringing and relations to Louisville, Kentucky functions not as autobiographical evidence, but rather to give the protagonist American credentials. The protagonist describes the setting as “a narrow southern community” which, he stresses to Steadman, is “Not London. Not even New York” (29), further distancing it from the global society and focusing on the rural values of the South. Similarly, the inclusion of sport allows Thompson to further the all-American setting. In post war America, sports grew to have a prominent position in the American national identity, with baseball identified as “America’s National Past-time.” The growing popularity of the National Football League similarly leading the sport to be described as a “quintessential cultural icon,” on par with “Mom, apple pie, and the flag” (Schwartz qtd. in Winston 405). The Derby depicted in the story was the 95<sup>th</sup> annual race, and already an institution (*Kentucky Derby*)

The journalist can thereby be seen a symbol of American values and interests in the late 1960s, a product of middle-America. Writing on the ideal of family togetherness Laura J.

Miller describes the physical separation into so-called “lifestyle enclaves” of the suburbs in the 1960s as an attempt to establish a morally superior foundation for the country (407-08). As a representative of the media, the Journalist is presented as both part of as well as writing for the Middle-Classes. Although the crowd is referenced at one point as being “middle-America,” the inclusion and unflattering description of Jimbo reveals how they are still deviants from the ideal. By the suggestions of alcohol-abuse, violence, gambling and sexual deviancy, the Journalist has created a stereotype for the crowd to live up to. However, like the “savages” of *Heart of Darkness*, Thompson is utilising this stereotype ironically, and with the conclusion of “The Kentucky Derby” it emphasizes his political point of middle-class hypocrisy.

### 2.1.3 “What Mace?”

The use of irony to carry a political point is carried over from Conrad to Thompson. Hillis Miller argues that although *Heart of Darkness* has been criticized as being racist and sexist, the reader is forced to consider these angles as being presented through a lens of irony, due, as mentioned, partly to the displaced narration. Further examples of this irony, Hillis Miller suggests, is in Kurtz’ undercutting of the idealistic “The Suppression of Savage Customs” by the violent postscript “Exterminate all the brutes!” (103). This same irony is present in “The Kentucky Derby” and once again it concerns how the protagonist – who functions as Kurtz in this retelling – in the final revelation undermines his own work. Portraying Steadman as an unwanted deviant, “we can do without your kind in Kentucky,” is a direct contradiction, not only of the title of the short-story, but of the events described in it (38). Unlike Conrad, however, I would argue that by telling the story from the point of view of “the wild journalist”

rather than the foreigner, Thompson shows the journalist's hypocritical corruption by repeated use of explicit irony.

From the title and opening dialogue with Jimbo, the protagonist has known and made clear to the reader exactly what he is looking for and intends to reveal; he arrives in Louisville – “a narrow, Southern society” – expecting an “atavistic freak-out” with “savage drunken attacks” being carried out by “thousands of raving, stumbling drunks” (27, 35, 31). His response and preparation is to purchase a can of mace for self-protection. However, though the protagonist's fears and paranoia continuously escalate, they fail to materialise in actual violent events: “None of the awful things I'd warned him about had happened so far – no race riots, firestorms or savage drunken attacks” the protagonist notes, and even as the race is about to start and they make their way to the infield he describes the scene as being “like a postcard from the Kentucky Derby” (35-36). Instead the paranoia leads the protagonist himself to finally succumb to senseless violence, such as in the restaurant scene, quoted here in full, where the protagonist and Steadman are thrown out, presumably, the reader is lead to believe, because of Steadman's sketching:

“Look, Ralph,” I said. “Let's not kid ourselves. That was a very horrible drawing you gave him. It was the face of a monster. It got on his nerves very badly.” I shrugged.

“Why in the hell do you think we left the restaurant so fast?”

“I thought it was because of the Mace,” he said.

“What Mace?”

He grinned. “When you shot it at the headwaiter, don't you remember?”

“Hell, that was nothing,” I said. “I missed him ... and we were leaving, anyway.”

“But it got all over us,” he said. “The room was full of that damn gas. Your

brother was sneezing and his wife was crying. My eyes hurt for two hours. I couldn't see to draw when we got back to the motel."

"That's right," I said. "The stuff got on her leg, didn't it?"

"She was angry," he said.

"Yeah ... well, okay ... Let's just figure we fucked up about equally on that one" (32).

This scene initially gives us a portrayal of Steadman as a dangerous deviant, with the journalist blind to his own actions. As such, Wolfe's description of the protagonist as "inept and half-psychotic" seems valid, but what Wolfe's reading of Thompson as both narrator and protagonist fails to accredit is the ironic distance these episodes are relayed by (172). The narrator is fully aware of the comic potential in this exchange and so structures the text around it, beginning with the protagonist's version of events. As the text progresses, the narrator thereby prevents the reader from sharing the protagonist's surprise at the lack of violence or drunkenness, allowing instead a viewpoint where the comedic irony of the protagonist's continuously erroneous and increasingly severe premonitions become clear.

The final exposure of the Journalist's hypocrisy is revealed on the final morning when, despite having come through the Derby without the expected horrors or troubles, he eventually spots the symbol he's been after:

My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant I thought that Ralph had brought somebody with him - a model for that one special face we'd been looking for. There he was, by God - a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature... like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album. It



was the face we'd been looking for - and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible  
... (37)

This final realization subverts the expectations first put forward in the title and opening of the text in a unity of effect with an ironic sense of a fulfilled destiny – it is “of course” his own face he spots. Having deplored and demeaned the Derby crowd for the duration of the narrative, the final verdict of this realization, “horrible, horrible,” echoes the dying words of Kurtz – “the horror, the horror!” in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (141). As mentioned, Thompson is not averse to quoting Conrad in his works, though normally it is done much more explicitly. This quote is instead adapted and embedded in the text: it is a key part of the narrative rather than setting a thematic tone as an epitaph. Similarly to how Marlow interprets Kurtz’ dying words to be a “judgement upon the adventures of his soul on this earth,” the reader is invited to read “horrible, horrible,” as the protagonist’s own judgement of his actions (142).

In a final gesture to Kurtz, the Journalist ends the text with a deeply ironic condemnation of Steadman as a “scumsucking foreign geek,” stating how “we can do without your kind in Kentucky” (38). Whereas the protagonist has in the course of the text tried to distance himself – at times physically, as with the mace – from the Louisville crowd, he ends the piece by a collective pronoun, distancing himself from all the immorality and twistedness Steadman seems to represent. His choice of profanities of “worthless faggot” and “pigfucker” suggests a damnation of sexual deviation, showing how his commitment has radically changed to now side with the previously described “narrow Southern society where the closest kind of inbreeding is not only stylish and acceptable, but far more convenient” (38, 31). From vilifying the Derby crowd and seeking to display their depravity, the Journalist, in an ironic twist, ends up blaming his own deprecation on Steadman, accusing him of introducing corruption and immorality to the morally superior society the Journalist represents. Like Kurtz postscript of

“Exterminate all the Brutes!”, the final paragraph is an accusation of political hypocrisy revealed and relayed through knowing irony.

#### 2.1.4 “The appalling face of a glimpsed truth”

Hillis Miller’s last “ostentatious literary feature” of *Heart of Darkness* is Conrad’s continual use of prosopopoeia, which he defines as “the ascription of a name, a face, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate or the dead” (7). It is a way of talking about and attributing a personality to something unknown, to create fictional features for symbolic and metaphoric purposes. As such, it is a dramatically literary technique that would be out of place in any straight journalism. In *Heart of Darkness*, prosopopoeia is evident already in the title, giving the darkness a heart, and as Miller points out, Conrad will frequently use various prosopopoeia to reference “what Conrad calls, in a misleading and inadequate metaphor, “the darkness,” or, “the wilderness,” or most simply and perhaps most truthfully, “it””(7).

Throughout Conrad’s novel, this unnamed and unexplained “it” is reoccurring as something elusive and never fully knowable. As Conrad describes it, the story is “some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth,” and though there are moments where Marlow glimpses what lies behind this cloth, the “it” is never revealed in its entirety (qtd in Miller 6): “The woods were unmoved, like a mask,” Marlow notes on his way to Kurtz’ hut, before concluding that Kurtz’ final statement of “the horror, the horror!” had “the appalling face of a glimpsed truth” (116, 143). Returning to Thompson we see the exact same use of prosopopoeia to create the same effect with the protagonist’s final revelation.

Similar to Conrad, Thompson starts off already in the title, giving the Kentucky Derby – a horse race – a personality, capable of human emotion, turning it into more than just the

event, making it a symbol, a representation of something – a culture, a mind-set, a class – and then judging it. In *his* chase for the “it,” the protagonist searches for the face, the “symbol, in my own mind, of that whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is” (31). Like Conrad, Thompson uses several metaphors to refer to his “it,” including the “*real* beasts” and perhaps most revealingly, “the mask of the whiskey gentry” (35). The “it” chased in “the Kentucky Derby” appears, through these metaphors, as something found in the crowd of people, rather than in a single individual or act. It is a common trait or value which only becomes visible in the gathering of people at this event. What the protagonist is looking for then, is “the sinister back-cloth” which seemingly draws these people together. However, he fails to achieve this, and ends instead with literally and metaphorically seeing “the appalling face of a glimpsed truth” in his own reflection, and passing a verdict on what he sees as being “horrible, horrible” (37). Despite his efforts to unveil the dark forces, the “it”, the protagonist is unable to get more than glimpses of the nature of the “*real* beasts”. In regards to the Faulkner quote from chapter 1, the journalist is seeking to report “the truth intact,” which ends up a fruitless pursuit (University of Virginia). What the reader is given instead, is the protagonist’s revelation of his *own* nature and the realization of the “sordid farce” he himself has enacted (Hillis Miller 6).

Opening *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow’s promise to the reader to “render justice” to Kurtz, which in turn, according to Hillis Miller, becomes a promise of revelation to the reader (4). However, he goes on to suggest that this promise is never kept, that the “it” remains elusive, and visible only in glimpses. Marlow promises to reveal his illuminations, however, as his illness takes him with Kurtz to the point where “it” can be glimpsed: “he [Kurtz] stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot” (144). The protagonist and the narrator of “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” both give similar promises of revelation and to describe the true nature of the “*real* beasts.” As well as the title

of the story, the protagonist continuously makes inaccurate predictions on the behaviour of the beasts, and like Marlow, ends up failing to fulfil his initial promises. This, in turn, has political ramifications.

As mentioned earlier, the elaborately American background of the unnamed journalist offers him as a symbol and product of respectable middle-American values and interest in the late 1960s. Hillis Miller suggests that the possibility of non-fulfilment is a crucial part of any promise, be it in literature or in politics, and that *Heart of Darkness* illustrates how the millennial promise of universal prosperity made by imperialist capitalism, forming the background for *Heart of Darkness*, is inseparable from the “it,” or the “darkness.” In comparison, the unfulfilled promise of “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” illustrates how middle-America is *not* a separate sphere from the problems of contemporary society. Instead of propagating the myth of the suburbanite middle-class, “The Kentucky Derby” highlights the futility of the project and the distancing into the aforementioned “lifestyle enclaves” (Miller 407-8). As decadence and immorality are not something found only in certain areas or in a certain class, it cannot be avoided simply by a division and parting of groups of people. Similarly, this is what the protagonist has been after throughout the text: not merely an individual face, but the representation of a kind of person, created by the coming together of a collective. “That special face” is dependent on the circumstances to be revealed, existing not in one individual but in the meeting of mind-sets and expectations (31).

The protagonist’s moment of revelation in the mirror then becomes a moment of realization of the true nature of middle-America, and his final words the judgement of his own class. By so elaborately expressing his expectations throughout the story, the narrator has revealed much of the protagonist’s own and, by extension, suburbanite middle-America’s prejudice and worldview. Rather than being able to give an account of the “it” the protagonist has been searching for, his conclusive “horrible, horrible,” therefore reveals the hypocrisy of

the middle class. Specifically, it highlights the lengths to which they, with the journalist a representative member, will go in order to vilify certain segments of society whilst themselves remaining decadent and depraved behind their respectable facades. As in the case of Killy, Thompson's portrayal suggests there is a layer of chaos behind the superficial order – in this case, the understanding of the Derby crowd as decadent beasts – and through the Journalist's final revelation he questions the authority behind this definition. Rejecting a prevailing understanding of truth which separates the middle classes from the rest of society, "The Kentucky Derby," perhaps even more directly than "The Temptations," again "seriously question who determined and created this truth" (Hutchinson 485).

#### 2.1.5 A Summary of Literary Traits

If we approach "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" without pre-judgement of author or presumed genre, the textual evidence presented in this discussion demands it be read as literature. The clear and plentiful existence of literary traits such as displaced narration, irony and prosopopoeia, whilst theoretically possible to exist individually in non-fictional texts, combine in this narrative in such a way as to invite the reader to read it as fictional literature. When we do so "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" is simultaneously a scathing indictment of the contemporary American society and its values, and an example of the impossible project of defining the "it", of presenting "the truth intact," or claiming "the ultimate word" (Faulkner, Bakhtin 293). By following the plot and structure of *Heart of Darkness* Thompson evokes the same sense of introspection and contemplation of his contemporary society, as the increasingly frazzled protagonist, rather than being able to reveal the "it," is

driven to admit not only the impossibility of his project, but the politically hypocritical foundations of presumed moral superiority upon which it is laid.

When read and interpreted as a short-story, the reader is not only forced to commend greater credit to the philosophical and political ambition in what has been regarded as a lighter, comic example of Thompson's work, but to regard the otherwise often dismissed "Duke of Gonzo" as a writer with serious political and literary interest. To quote Conrad's description of the plot of *Heart of Darkness*, "the subject seems comic, but it isn't"(qtd. in Rubery 762). Furthermore, what "The Kentucky Derby" illustrates is Thompson's thematic concern of an authoritative truth, previously discussed in terms of characters, which is here used to emphasize a larger, overarching political point. When given the chance by the reader, my argument is that Thompson is predominantly literary, focused around precisely this search for and figuration of truth.

## **2.2 Myth, Truth & the Inaccessible Silence of "A Footloose American"**

At roughly 1300 words, "A Footloose American" is a comparatively short text. In its original publication in the *National Observer*, written during Thompson's stint as South American correspondent in 1964, it barely covered a page (aided by a picture and an advertisement), whereas the reprint in *The Great Shark Hunt* covers three pages (*National Observer*). However, within this meagre space, Thompson manages to pack in an amount of content indicative of intense deliberation, divided into three distinct sections. Challenging, and revealing, the limits of monologic journalism, I would argue that in order to appreciate what Attridge terms the "singularity of the work," that is, its essence, its inherent defining otherness, "A Footloose

American in a Smuggler's Den" demands to be read as a short-story, and an example of Thompson's literature (79).

The first of the three sections, described by McKeen as "Hemingwayesque," effectively sets the scene and mood for the subsequent events (18). I include it here in its entirety to give the reader a sense of the style and tone of the piece:

In Puerto Estrella, Colombia, there is little to do but talk. It is difficult to say just what the villagers are talking about however, because they speak their own language—a tongue called Guajiro, a bit like Arabic, which doesn't ring well in a white man's ear.

Usually they are talking about smuggling, because this tiny village with thatched roof huts and a total population of about 100 South American Indians is a very important port of entry. Not for humans, but for items like whisky and tobacco and jewellery. It is not possible for a man to get there by licensed carrier, because there are no immigration officials and no customs. There is no law at all, in fact, which is precisely why Puerto Estrella is such an important port.

It is far out at the northern tip of a dry and rocky peninsula called La Guajira, on which there are no roads and a great deal of overland truck traffic. The trucks carry contraband, hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of it, bound for the interiors of Colombia and Venezuela. Most of it comes from Aruba, brought over at night on fast trawlers and put ashore at Puerto Estrella for distribution down the peninsula on the trucks (345).

As in Hemingway's sparse prose, there is no undue amount of descriptions for the reader, but rather a clear, authoritative voice conveying seemingly unquestionable facts, as verified by the speaker himself. However, as McGregor's notion of literary thickness infers, the absence of an

explicit protagonist or inner monologue does not necessarily mean it is an objective assessment of the situation. By applying his concepts of how form and content combine to create literary function to the earlier extract from “A Footloose American,” we begin to see clear indications of why it is possible to read the text as literature.

In the opening declaration of Puerto Estrella as a “smugglers’ den”, Thompson defines and describes a setting that would be familiar to a reader of popular literature, apparently using a familiar form to allude to a known content and function in a literary narrative – in this case the adventure story. There are certain expectations to such a dramatic denotation, and the opening section initially seems to fulfil them: there are “no immigration officials and no customs,” in fact, “there is no law at all” in this “tiny village [...] far out at the northern tip of a dry and rocky peninsula” and so trucks drive “hundreds of thousands of dollars” worth of “contraband” to Columbia and Venezuela (345-46). So far, the exaggerated language and menacing descriptions appear to have more in common with the opening to a pulp paperback than an article in a serious newspaper. Rather than trying to give a nuanced and realistic portrayal, it seems the narrator is deliberately seeking the two-dimensional stereotype of the “Smugglers’ Den.” Through the titular naming of a “Footloose American” and the subjective narration of how the language “doesn’t ring well in a white man’s ear” there is a clear opposition – not to say polarization – made between the locals and the narrator and protagonist (345). The title and opening descriptions combine to impress upon the reader a stereotypically lawless setting and hints of the contrasting heroic nature of a protagonist.

So far, all this is achieved without the protagonist effectively entering the narrative. As he arrives, the ground has already been laid for a clash of cultures and the opening paragraph of the second section commences by developing the estrangement of locals and white visitor:



I arrived at dusk on a fishing sloop from Aruba. And since there is no harbour I was put ashore in a tiny rowboat. Above us, on a sharp cliff, stood the entire population of the village, staring grimly and without much obvious hospitality at Puerto Estrella's first tourist history.

In Aruba, the Guajiro Indians are described as "fierce and crazy and drunk all day on coconut whisky." Also In Aruba you will hear that the men wear "nothing but neckties, knotted just below the navel." That sort of information can make a man uneasy (346).

These two paragraphs not only continue to distinguish the hero from his setting, alluded to in the opening descriptions, but solidify impressions and emotions in characters; the protagonist arrives to meet the "fierce and crazy" population who, wearing "nothing but neckties" meets him on the "sharp cliff" above the entry point, "staring grimly" at the new arrival (346). The content and form is currently inseparable: the exaggerated and literary language of the opening section seemingly abandons realism (how is the protagonist able to make out the faces of the Guajiro if he arrives at dusk?) for the striking and contrasting images playing upon familiar tropes and stereotypes. The effect, and thus the function, is the imagining of a familiar yet unknown setting with promises of adventure and danger.

If "The Kentucky Derby" is Thompson's retelling of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, then "A Footloose American in a Smugglers' Den" could be said to be his *Lord Jim*: there is a similar subversion and anticlimactic resolution to the anticipation and expectations initially shared by protagonist and reader, stemming from vividly imaginative descriptions. Despite evoking stereotypes, through its form and content, the actual function of both Puerto Estrella and the protagonist are deliberately different.

The first of these subversions of expectation surrounds the function of the protagonist. Despite what the opening form and content have made the reader predict, he is no castaway, outlaw fugitive or even a missionary. Instead, he describes himself as a tourist and, when “taken before a jury of village bigwigs [...] to determine the meaning of my presence” he demonstrates his camera (346). Though never specified outright, the implication is that he is a journalist. Having first demystified (if not even let down!) readers expecting a courageous and adventurous and fearless “footloose American” hero, the narrator similarly goes on to dismantle the image he himself evoked of the setting by the title and early descriptions. The alluring opening sentence of “in Puerto Estrella, Colombia, there is little to do but talk” turns out to be disappointingly accurate, as eventually the arresting *boredom* of the alleged “smugglers’ den” drives the protagonist to leave at first opportunity (345). Before then he has already had the time to note how “there is not much for the tourist in Puerto Estrella, no hotels, restaurants or souvenirs. Nor is the food palatable.” As such, “there is nothing to do but drink [...] in the mornings we had Scotch and arm-wrestling; in the afternoons, Scotch and dominoes” (347).

As in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” irony comes to the fore through the temporal distancing between the narrator from the events. In other words, even if we chose to read the narrator and protagonist as the same person, it is clear that there is a change happening in the latter over the course of the story, and that the views, assessments and expectations made by the protagonist in the beginning are ironically relayed by the narrator: if the narrator seeks to inform the reader about the actual conditions of the Guajiro, rather than propagate myth, there would be no use of feeding the reader exaggerated expectations in the opening section. This is perhaps best illustrated by how the foreboding and enticing opening line of “in Puerto Estrella, Columbia, there is little to do but talk,” is rephrased later – with significantly less excitement – as “there is nothing to do but drink” (345-47).

Having survived his disillusioning stay without much incident, the narrator still finds ironic subversions in the description of the protagonist's return to civilization. Rather than a triumphant return or a lucky escape from peril, he ends an uneventful truck ride by meeting a "savage looking gendarme" who gives him a thorough search due to his arrival from a place "known to be populated by killers and thieves and men given over to lives of crime" (348). Yet, the narrator notes with disappointment, "nobody believed I had been there" (348). Ending the story is the realization of the unity of effect through a politically ironic punchline of how, on his return from his stay with the presumed "fierce and crazy" Indians, he was forced to drink beer with the locals as "Scotch is so expensive [...] that only the rich can afford it" (348).

I bring these subversions to the front because they not only pervade the text and are crucial to the story being told, but because, as with Hemingway's use of Marty, of their underlining *purpose*. In other words; though Thompson occasionally uses irony to comedic effect, what this text most clearly shows is the construction and function of irony in the form and inseparability of form from content. As in "The Kentucky Derby" I would argue that a lot of the comedic irony in the text stems from the incongruent relationship between expectations and reality, between fact and fiction. "A Footloose American" demonstrates how truth can be found in both of these spheres, and how it is used authoritatively.

### 2.2.1 The Inaccessible Silence

McGregor holds that "to appreciate a work is to recognize its value; specifically, to grasp the literary value of a literary work" (2). In previous sections I have looked at how certain features and traits, such as the displaced narration and heavy irony, are textual aids that help the reader recognize a text as literature. What I will go on to do, and what I find "A Footloose American"

to be a particularly apt text to analyse in relation to, is how this appreciation changes the supposed factual and objective “true” nature of a newspaper article to what Stein Haugom Olsen defines as “the assumption that literature is invention and imagination, ‘story’ rather than ‘history’” (160). This definition of literature, whilst perhaps not problematic, is certainly one that Thompson persistently plays with throughout his oeuvre. As the previous analyses have pointed out, the line between fiction and truth, literature and journalism, was one Thompson continuously challenged, and in “A Footloose American” he questions the validity of monologic journalism through its attempts at covering “the truth intact”. Wolfe defines journalism as “giving the full objective description,” and I have previously quoted how Bakhtin defines monologism as presenting itself as “the ultimate word,” and “A Footloose American” brings the inadequacies of both these concepts by introducing multiple, contrasting, voices.

In the opening paragraphs we are relayed the descriptions, legends and stories which the protagonist has heard in preparation for his arrival at Puerto Estrella, yet the proceeding events then seem to discard these as overblown rumours, and the true nature and behaviour of the Guajiro revealed to be vastly different from what the protagonist expected. The efforts of the narrator to keep the text monologic force the reader to question whether this text “renders justice” to the Guajiro. With the existence of the stories and legends, the text initially presents multiple perspectives which are incompatible with the protagonist’s experiences, questioning his “ultimate word” (Bakhtin 293). The reader has to either trust both the narrator and the protagonist and suppose that the experiences of the protagonist is a fair portrayal of the real Guajiro, or trust the narrator and *mistrust* the protagonist, accepting instead the stories given from the local communities. The final option to the reader is of course to mistrust the narrator’s representation entirely, both in terms of the stories from locals and from the protagonist. Independently of the reader’s choice, then, the text is not able to offer the monologic “truth intact” (Faulkner). As in the “The Kentucky Derby,” the attempts of the protagonist to present

“the ultimate word” are unsuccessful, and in the case of “A Footloose American” it comes to the fore in the presentation of multiple perspectives which seemingly offer different aspects of truth (Bakhtin 293).

I would argue “A Footloose American” is a contrasting yet completing opposite to “The Kentucky Derby” in Thompson’s fiction. The clear voice of the narrator is simultaneously the defining trait of Thompson’s work, at the same time at what most clearly connects his fiction. Whereas the distance between narrator and protagonist is distinctly noted in “The Kentucky Derby,” the relationship between the two is more difficult to categorize in “A Footloose American.” However, even if the two are the same – and this reading is possible – there is still a temporal distance between them. The narrator is privy to hindsight, and he uses this in his construction of the re-telling to maximise the disappointment and subversion of the reader’s expectations. As such, the literary singularity of “A Footloose American” stems from the same origins as in “The Kentucky Derby,” with the unreliable authority of the narrator eventually shifting the text from subjective journalism to literary fiction.

As remarked in the discussion of the opening section, “A Footloose American in a Smuggler’s Den” can be characterised by its sparsity, which comes to the fore both in form and in content. This stands in stark contrast to “The Kentucky Derby”: whereas an initially innocent report on a horse race results in 14 pages of mayhem, a portrayal of a “smuggler’s den” barely gets 3, the bulk of which is used to give words to the eventlessness of the stay. In fact, the sparse yet alluring opening paragraphs turn out to be the peak of excitement for the protagonist (together with the process of leaving): in Puerto Estrella itself there is “nothing to do” (347).

However, one important stylistic choice in this regard is the portrayal of boredom, the form used to express a content defined by monotony. Having seemingly debunked the romantic image of the smugglers, the narrator seems very reluctant to offer an alternative. The

descriptions of the Guajiro are short and brief and concern themselves mainly with superficial descriptions, such as “most of the men wore the necktie – a Guajiro version of the time-honored loin-cloth” and “the women, again with few exceptions, wore dull and shapeless black gowns” (347). Similarly, apart from the relayed rumours in the opening, the reader is given no more insight into the background of the protagonist prior to his arrival; as to *why* he is there or how he is *allowed* to be there, no explanation is given. This choice of depicting uneventful days through a description of the non-events, rather than detailed descriptions of the conditions, is a defining stylistic choice of the text, and one that highlights the clear shortcoming of a monologic narration: in what sets out to be a report on the Guajiro, to refrain from quoting a single statement from the subject is not only reductive, but never explained.

Opening by specifically noting the sound and construction of the Guajiro language, the first paragraph crucially ends with the conclusion that the language “doesn’t ring well in a white man’s ear” offering the reader no further insight to the Guajiro’s communication (345). After this, all descriptions of what the Guajiro say or do is relayed through a monologic mediator; the reader is dependent on and guided by second hand descriptions and interpretations of acts and events: “after an hour or so of gestures [...] they seemed to feel a drinking bout was in order. The Scotch was opened, five jiggers were filled, and the ceremony began” (347). In chapter 1 I highlighted how Thompson’s texts are inherently dialogic, refusing “the ultimate word” claimed by monologism (Bakhtin 293). The protagonist of “A Footloose American” directly illustrates this, by failing to present a verdict on the Guajiro. The silence in “A Footloose American” thereby undermines monologism by illustrating how truth is multifaceted: truth is in its nature subjective, and remains incomplete if it fails to allow for a multiplicity of voices.

Meanwhile, it is precisely the silence of “A Footloose American” that makes it literary: as with “The Kentucky Derby,” the pleasure and singularity of “A Footloose American” lies in

what Attridge refers to as their ability to being re-read. Whereas a report on a horse race or a description of the conditions of the Guajiro is only worth re-reading “if I fail to grasp the works argument, or I forget what I had gleaned the first time round... re-reading the literary work, by contrast, is an affirmation of its literariness” (89). The pleasure and purpose of these text lie not in their stated objective, but in the way it is reached, how the language is formed and utilized, the reader responding to what Attridge calls the “singularity of the work” (79).

Hillis Miller, borrowing from *Foe* by J.M Coetzee<sup>8</sup>, describes the same concept by stating how there is an “inaccessible silence” at the centre of every piece of literature (137-138). This seemingly paradoxical concept is one Hillis Miller refers to as making *Foe* a work of literary theory as well as a novel, and a “suspension of referential or “realist” models of story-telling; the forceful putting in doubt of the reader’s own stabilities and certainties” in the traditionally literary vein of Cervantes and Shakespeare (138-139). The essence of the “inaccessible silence,” although Hillis Miller seems reluctant to explore it, is seemingly paradoxical: the existence of an opposing “accessible silence” seems self-contradictory. Yet, in reference to literature, and in what defines the literary as literary, it appears a defining concept. Previously I have referred to Attridge’s use of a literary work’s “singularity,” and adopted McGregor’s term “literary thickness” to describe how the effect of the work lies in the inseparability of form and content. The “inaccessible silence” in literature then, is that which can only be relayed through the actual *reading* of literature. The essence, the “singularity” of the literary is materialised in the process of reading. Similarly to the unsuccessful attempt at

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<sup>8</sup> Hillis Miller refers to *Foe* as both a reimagining, a mutilation, revisionist commentary and a reading of Defoe’s original. Making “Robinson Crusoe” and “Foe,” a famous writer with multiple connections to Defoe’s own past, co-exist in the same literary universe - yet their only connection being mutual acquaintances of “Susan Barton,” a character of Coetzee’s creation and the narrative’s chief protagonist - the novel not only plays upon the original story, but of how stories work in general. Having survived and returned from her castaway experience with Crusoe, Susan seeks out Foe to tell her story for her “for though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of truth” (51). Yet this endeavour proves a difficult task, as Foe summarizes “in every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken [...] Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (141).

rendering the “truth intact” in an account of the Guajiro, I may go on at length to describe Thompson’s “An American Footloose in a Smugglers’ Den,” without any objective exploration or analysis being able to give the reader access to the same literary experience, the “singularity,” as when encountering the text itself. This is because there is no way to name the effect of a text, the feel of it, the content and form cannot be separated, making the “silence” at the centre too subjective and individual to each reader for such an allowance.

The very, paradoxically, tangible presence of this “inaccessible silence” is one of the traits that, when noticed, is characteristic of Thompson’s literature. I referenced how Hillis Miller quoted Joseph Conrad’s description of *Heart of Darkness* as “some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-drop” and how, according to Hillis Miller, the goal of the novel seems to be to remove the “veil hiding something more truthful or essential behind” (5-6). In a literary reading of “The Kentucky Derby,” this is the same, main effort of “the Journalist,” though he is, in the end, unsuccessful at revealing more than small glimpses through the veil, of hinting at a larger truth. In “A Footloose American,” we see how it is impossible to reveal the veil in its entirety, as monologism is unable to present “the truth intact” (Faulkner).

There is then, a great similarity in the concepts of “an inaccessible silence” and “the unveiling of truth,” which would argue for great correspondence between two initially contrasting texts. Though the portrayal of the protagonist in both form and content differ between the texts, the function remains the same: neither story is able to adequately express the full, extensive truth at the core of their interest. Both an “inaccessible silence” and “the unveiling of truth” suggest an incompleteness at the heart of every narrative.

Regarding truth as multifaceted, fiction becomes more true than journalism, because whereas journalism, in its attempt to cover and report a complete and objective truth is bound to fail, fiction allows for the development of *an* understanding by validating multiple voices.



Rather than claiming “the ultimate word”, this understanding is relayed with an acknowledgment of the restriction inherent in the medium: fiction and literature are able to use the reader’s suspension of disbelief to fill in the gaps and form a coherent narrative (Bakhtin 293). Whereas monologic journalism attempts to present “the truth intact,” fiction and literature offers instead a subjective evaluation and individually personal experience (Faulkner).

The alternate goals of journalism and literature might best be illustrated by the different achievements of Thompson-as-author and his protagonist in “A Footloose American.” At the final stages of the short-story it reaches its unity of effect when, upon returning with a presumably true and honest portrayal and experience with the Guajiro, the protagonist discovers that “nobody really believed I had been there” (348). Even when confronted with truth, the locals of Barranquilla still persist with their own understanding. This is when the text finally opens up to a dialogic aspect, revealing how, despite incorporating opposing understandings, both the journalist and the locals of Barranquilla can have a valid and “true” understanding of the Guajiro. Whereas the protagonist has failed in presenting a journalistic, monologic “ultimate word” on the Guajiro, Thompson has successfully given a literary and dialogic explanation accounting for the existence of multiple aspects of truth (Bakhtin 293) .

## Conclusions

*“Which is not to say that fiction is necessarily ‘more true’ than journalism – or vice versa – but that both ‘fiction’ and ‘journalism’ are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end.”*

- Hunter S. Thompson – “Jacket Copy for  
*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*”

The purpose of this thesis has been two-fold. Whilst initially concerned with opening Hunter S. Thompson’s work to a broader range of criticism based on its so-far unappreciated literary potential, it has simultaneously tried to illustrate why, in 2016, not only Thompson but fiction writing in general remains and provides an essential aspect and important democratic function in modern society.

In order to do justice to both these goals, this conclusion is similarly divided, with the first part seeking to summarize what this thesis has added to our appreciation of Thompson, and how the literary approach to his early work is rewarded. Distancing him from both journalism in general, as well as the sub-New Journalism genre of Gonzo, I have argued that the literary “singularity” of Thompson’s work demands it be read as literature (Attridge 79). By this response, his works become political and philosophical in their literary themes, questioning the existence of objective experience in favour of a multi-faceted, subjective experience of truth.

The second part extends the above conclusion by regarding Thompson's literary legacy in this new light, and reconsidering his position in the annals of American writers. Whilst always considered politically engaged, a reading of Thompson as a writer of fiction, rather than as a product of the New Journalists or the 1960s political landscape, recognizes him as part of a long and proud history of American writers using fiction as a democratic tool for questioning authority, in the manner of writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner. What these writers have shown throughout various regimes and stages of the American socio-political history is that there is no purpose in having art "bring order out of chaos," unless we acknowledge the chaos inherent in the existing order (Thompson 372). In this regard, fiction remains a valuable tool in showing truths otherwise ignored or repressed by facts and history.

### **3.1 Order out of Chaos**

In the introduction I referenced how the phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words" was first used to describe a drawing, and mentioned how this is relevant to Thompson's work as his work is characterized by his desire to interpret the world, rather than report it. This is also what distances Thompson not only from journalism, defined by Wolfe as "the full objective description," but also from the New Journalists in general (21). Rather than accepting Wolfe's definition of New Journalism as an attempt to add to "the full objective description," Thompson's texts rejects the possibility of such an endeavour outright (21). As such, whereas other critics, most notably McKeen, have sought to credit Thompson's writing as being "disjointed, spontaneous, and loose, and it could only appear so if it were none of the above," I have attempted to illustrate the rewards of reading Thompson as a writer of literature, and

how this highlights the merit of his work, repositioning him as part of a larger literary tradition (McKean X).

The key to reading Thompson's works as literature lies in separating the writer from the dominating voice of the narrator, and to notice how deliberately the protagonists are manipulated to serve a particular function in the narratives. The separation allows for a greater interest in, and recognition of the value of, the narrator and the protagonist, as they are able to function as independent, literary, characters. The voice of the narrator, working in tandem with the actions of the protagonist in the plot, allow for them to be more than representations of the author, but to be "carrier of ideas" in their own right (Bakhtin 79).

There is, of course, still a relentless comedic irony combining with a very personal language, but the literary approach reveals the distance this narration is relayed by. Through the highlighting of a textually demanded separation of author and narrator, as well as narrator and protagonist, the texts become more than comedic reports of a "frantic loser," (Wolfe 172). Rather than writing humorously for the purpose of entertainment, Thompson persistently uses this humour to engage with literary and political issues; though he might agree with Bruce Jay Friedman's quote that, in order to write comic fantasy in the sixties, "all one need do is report, journalistically, the current scene," he remains serious through the humour. Whilst his attempts at giving a nuanced portrayal of Jean-Claude Killy might result in an at-times comical farce, it is still being done in an attempt to answer "those questions," of trying to give the reader an access to glimpses of the "inaccessible silence."

The distance between author and narrator is what shifts the texts from monologic to dialogic, and from journalism to literature. In accordance with Faulkner's notion that "no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you [...] the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact" Thompson uses the subjectivity permitted to him in literature to present instead

a complete description of a personal experience (University of Virginia). Rather than claiming “the ultimate word,” he explicitly gives the reader insight into the experiences which form and inform the opinions of his narrators, exposing the source of his subjective voice, rather than feigning objectivity (Bakhtin 293). For a writer accepting Saussure and Faulkner’s view of truth as a multi-faceted subjective experience determined by point of view, a truthful report would be realized through a full disclosure of his subjective experience, rather than portraying truth as objective and conclusive.

Through the dialogic and literary approach Thompson is able to show how fiction is able to highlight aspects of truth ignored or out of reach to traditional journalism. Susan Mizruchi, writing on Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, argues that the work defends literature as a source of historical truth by how “the historian is overwhelmed with considerations which require careful omissions and suppressions. The comparative lack of concern over fiction makes it a potential source of historical truth,” (qtd in Eaton, 227). However, whereas this statement suggests fiction might accidentally happen upon truth, it nevertheless touches upon the important fact that, as Eaton states in the same article, “history resembles fiction, moreover, insofar as it constructs a narrative or story out of historical fact” (215). In his portrayals of characters, I have argued that Thompson is able to precisely “construct a narrative out of historical fact,” but that by basing the facts of his story on subjective interpretations, his portrayal illustrates how truth itself is subjective (Eaton 215). Rather than being a “potential source of historical truth,” Thompson’s portrayal of both Jean-Claude Killy and Ernest Hemingway are complete interpretations of a truthful aspect, which, whilst forced to be considered as literary characters, nevertheless are true according to their medium (Mizruchi, qtd in Eaton 227).

In “What Lured” Thompson explicitly states that, “the function of art is to bring order out of chaos” (372). This quote simultaneously admits to an inherently chaotic existence, at the

same time as revealing how through the act of representing the world, it necessarily has to be changed to fit what the artist sees. The view of truth as multifaceted demands a writer's acknowledgement of his subjective restraints in order to prevent him from misleading or even deceiving his readers, and I would argue that through this acknowledgement, Thompson is able to use fiction to persistently answer "those questions" in his work. Acknowledging the "inaccessible silence" is what allows Thompson glimpses of the "it" behind what Hillis Miller refers to as "the hidden veil," as well as what shifts him from a journalist to a writer of literature (5).

### **3.2 Chaos inherent in the Order**

Writing on the novel in the sixties, John Aldrige states that a literary work "can no longer be confined to a simple exploration of the social appearances and surfaces, but must be expanded and deepened to take into account the chaotic multiplicity of meaning" (qtd in Harris 19). Charles B. Harris goes on to suggest that the absurdist novelists of the era illustrate "the ultimately absurdity of life" through "a series of preposterous and ridiculous events, by characters who – although described with apparent gravity – are distorted, exaggerated and caricatured," and which ultimately, as quoted in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, ends up reading like a "goofy story that might be real funny if it weren't for the cartoon figures being real guys" (Harris 22, qtd in Harris 28). Part of what makes Thompson such an engaging and enduring read is no doubt his absurd humour and what Sanford Pinsker, writing about the Black Humourists, describes as the texts' "rapid-fire delivery and comic pacing," owing "a greater debt to the stand-up comedian than the sit-down novelist" (17). However, in order to fully appreciate Thompson and understand his work, the reader similarly can't restrain

himself to “the social appearances and surfaces,” but must “take into account the chaotic multiplicity of meaning” (Aldrige in Harris 19).

“History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit,” Thompson wrote in chapter 8 of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, (Thompson 67). Reminiscing about the mood of the sixties, Thompson dismisses history and proclaims how his generation united “for reasons nobody really [understood] at the time – and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened ... maybe it *meant something*” (66, original italics). It is this precise political consciousness of meaning which is so often overlooked in readings of Thompson, in which the demanding entertainment of his exaggerated public persona leads to the ignoring of a vital and sincere political voice. Thompson’s literary legacy is drowned by the myth of the Duke of Gonzo, an empty, angry, superficial pop-culture character – a symbol of the politically neutered culture Thompson himself repeatedly criticised. In 1964 he wrote an article called “When the Beatniks Were Social Lions” for the *National Observer*, and in a eulogy to the freelance journalist Lionel Olay in 1967 entitled “The Ultimate Free Lancer” he launches into an outright attack on what he deems the “cheap, mean, grinning-hippie capitalism that pervades the whole new scene,” quoted here at length (99):

To see the honest rebellion that came out of World War Two taken over by a witless phoney like Warhol .... The Exploding Plastic Inevitable, lights, noise, love the bomb! And then to see a bedrock madman like Ginsberg copping out with tolerance poems and the same sort of swill that normally comes from the Vatican. Kerouac hiding out back with his ‘mère’ on Long Island or maybe St. Petersburg [...] And who the fuck is ‘Tom Wilson’, the ‘producer’ whose name rides so high on the record jacket? By any other name he’s a vicious ten-percenter who sold ‘army surplus commodities’ in the late 1940s, ‘special guaranteed used cars’ in the 1950s thirty-cent thumb-prints of John

Kennedy in the 1960s... until he figured out that the really big money was in drop-out revolution. Ride the big wave: folk rock, pot symbols, long hair, and \$2.50 minimum at the door. Light shows! Tim Leary! Warhol! NOW! (99-100)

The role of “Duke of Gonzo” then, seems to define Thompson as the very symbol of the commercialized rebellion he criticises. What the literary reading of Thompson in this thesis offers as a replacement, is of Thompson as a writer of fiction concerned with the authority of truth, and the democratic value of literature. His famed hatred for Richard Nixon similarly stems from how he perceives Nixon to knowingly and falsely claim the “full, objective description” (Wolfe 21). This is shown in how the recurring accusations labelled at the former president is of him being “a crook” and “a liar,” both of which appear already in the ingress for his final article “He Was A Crook,” published after Nixon’s death (*The Atlantic*). Later in the same text he goes on to state:

Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism -- which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful. (*The Atlantic*)

It is this distance from objective journalism to the subjective that I have shown guides him Thompson into the territory of fiction, and it is this aspect that enables him to portray the



American society from alternate angles and thereby question who holds the authority of truth. However, in opposition to the (New) Journalists, this thematic concern for truth merely cements Thompson's role in a large lineage. Mark A. Eaton prefaces his article "Lost in their Mazes" on the political faction of Melville's "Benito Cereno" with a quote from Carlos Fuentes stating, "Art gives life to what history killed. Art gives voice to what history denied, silenced, or persecuted. Art brings truth to the lies of history". Eaton goes on to suggest that by imposing a fictional story in a historical framework in "Benito Cereno," Melville's story "exposes the political bias of historical interpretation," with Eaton stating that "facts can be as much explained, examined, interpreted, illumined, and indeed produced, by fictional texts" (216, 229). Nor is this limited to "Benito Cereno," as *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, Melville's final novel, published posthumously, "defends his [Melville's] lifelong devotion to fiction [...] not merely to provide entertainment, but to probe the so-called facts of the world" (216). Eaton's conclusive remarks of how "in his fiction, Melville tried to shed light on a shadow side to social reality, or aspects of history that were suppressed," is not only applicable to Thompson, but a long line of American writers (228).

From Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, via texts such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Edith Wharton's *Summer*, to name but a few, the moral authority in the name of truth, as claimed by certain sections of society, have been questioned. From the chastising of Hester Prynne to Captain Delano's failure of recognizing the true situation aboard the *San Dominick*, some the construction of or interpretation of truth is problematized and depicted as a political tool used to gain and maintain authority. What these novels and stories achieve by the use of real life situations and people, is to give voices to the ignored and rejected, reflecting the greater debate of democracy that has persisted throughout the history of the United States. Fiction becomes a tool in democratizing truth: in order for art "to bring order out of chaos," the readers must first acknowledge the existence of a suppressed chaos.

Similar to how Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!* presents several aspects in which, he later stated, “nobody saw the truth intact,” this thesis has argued that Thompson’s work explores how order is upheld, and how truth, as a concept, is key (University of Virginia). By preferring literature to journalism, he is making a statement about the fundamental flaws of the journalistic genre, and critiquing its value in his contemporary time. In opposition to a falsely accepted perfect, objective “truth intact,” he uses the subjectivity permitted to him in literature to present instead a complete description of a personal experience. Rather than claiming “the ultimate word,” he explicitly gives the reader insight into the experiences which formed the opinions of his narrators, exposing the source of his subjective voice, rather than feigning objectivity. Through this, he is able to present an alternate view on a presumed order, and to ignore the “built-in blind spots of Objective journalism” (“He Was A Crook”). When responding to the singularity of his work, Thompson’s texts demand he be considered a writer of literature, and a writer concerned with a politicized truth, in the vein of Conrad, Melville and Faulkner.

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