



# HUNTING EXPEDITION AS ANALOGY FOR THE VIETNAM WAR

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## ABSTRACT

*Norman Mailer was born to Jewish parents, but when he began writing novels he did not want to be labelled as "Jewish" in his writings. That was probably the reason why he chose to write about main-stream issues of America. In the novel, Why Are We in Vietnam? (1967), Mailer writes about the Vietnam War, and uses the analogy of the Alaskan hunt as a reflection of the unheroic, neurotic and sadistic impulses of America, which were unleashed in Vietnam. The narrator, D.J. describes the hunt that his father, Rusty, a Texan business executive arranges with his fellow executives, Pete and Phil, along with D.J. and his friend, Tex. They are accompanied by Luke Fellinka, the tough and experienced hunter, and his assistant, Ollie.*

## INTRODUCTION

D. J. appears to be a schizophrenic narrator, as this thought is emphasized by D.J.'s references to himself as "Jekyll" (Vietnam, 26). The unique narrative voice of D.J. serves many functions, apart from the narration. This mode of narration also gives the author the freedom and flexibility to be able to frequently move from one mood to another, without appearing contrived. Regarding the voice of narration, Robert Solataroff says, that "by using a partially dehumanized narrative voice one could combine humour and profundity, play and social criticism". (Solataroff, 203)

The book is divided into "Intro Beeps" and "Chaps." The use of the first person "T" in Intro Beeps serves to give a background to the narrative, and the style is more informal than the

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one used in "Chaps." D.J. also uses "Intro Beeps" to digress from the narrative and give his personal opinions. In "Chaps", DJ continues with the narrative. He uses the third person narrative and adopts a relatively more formal style of narration in "Chaps."

The background of the wilderness serves to juxtapose the ills of frenzied living in cities. Living in a technological society, man has been adversely affected by it and his life has become inauthentic, which has led to frustration, schizophrenia, and insanity. The jungle has also been corrupted by the technological encroachment of man, as the helicopters flying overhead are polluting the tranquillity of the jungle, and "are exploding psychic energy all over the place". (Vietnam, 115) Not only man, but even animals are affected by the ill-effects of technology. Mailer had mentioned earlier "Animals subjected to constant interruption go mad". (Cannibals and Christians, 285)

Mailer has always emphasized that a man's senses are violated by continuous interruptions from various sources of media. In *The Armies of the Night* (1968). Mailer says that our minds are:

*Jabbed and poked and twitched and probed and finally galvanized into surrealistic modes of response by commercials cutting into dramatic narratives, and parents flipping from net work to net work they are forced willy-nilly to build their idea of a space continuum (and therefore, their nervous system) on the jumps and cracks and leaps and breaks which every phenomenon from the media seemed to contain with it. (Armies, 103)*

D. J. and Tex discover another facet of the jungle. They discover that their sensitivity has been enhanced in the jungle to such a degree that they are able to receive telepathic thought waves. In this context, the voice of D.J. is referred to as "the undiscovered magnetic-electro field of the dream" (Vietnam, 170), which is converted into light waves and called the universal Mind. In this way each person is reduced to being a component of "the dream field" (Vietnam, 172), which is received by that "land above the circle". (Vietnam, 172)

D. J. dwells in detail on technological details. The description of guns covers many pages in the narrative. Guns are a symbol of power to the hunters. At the same time they are also phallic symbols, and this accounts for the loving care with which they handle their guns. Jennifer Bailey says, "The guns of the hunters are just such impotent phalluses when they maim and reduce to madness the animals they pursue (Bailey, 80).

The characters are for the most part, sexually repressed and the images conveying frustration in attaining orgasm are effectively portrayed. Luke Fellinka's gnawing fear of gradually



losing his nerve in the face of danger is expressed by D.J. in the image of the frustrated auditor who fails to reach orgasm in spite of all efforts of the call girl to satisfy him (Vietnam, 115-16).

Odour plays an important part in the novel. The odour from the dead female grizzly warns other bears of the danger from hunters "those bears can smell... dead female grizzer with twelve slugs in her... after death has passed through the vale and got an odour of the other, of the tomb". (Vietnam, 120-21)

The hunters smell the clear air of the Arctic jungle and notice that the North has "a tricky clean smell, like a fine nerve washed in alcohol". (Vietnam, 68)

While ruminating about bear smell, Rusty is of the opinion that the bear:

*smells like no pine forest Rusty ever saw, for the odour goes in and in again until he is forced to breathe all the way, aisles are opening in his brain before the incense of it which is like the odour of the long fall in a dream. (Vietnam, 107)*

D. J. is a complex character. As a narrator, his tone undergoes many changes. Sometimes he is serious, sometimes mocking; sometimes he even becomes lyrical, especially when describing nature. The description of the King Moose that D.J. and Tex see in the evening has a profound and lasting impression on the boys. The call of the King Moose touches them deeply:

*by some resonance of this grunt a herd of memories of animals at work and on the march and something gruff in the sharp wounded heart of things bleeding somewhere in the night, a sound somewhere in that voice in the North which spoke beneath all else to... [D.J. and Tex]. (Vietnam, 197)*

Nature in all its facets is revealed to D.J. and Tex. Apart from profound scenes like the sight of grizzly bears and the King Moose, the boys are exposed to a semi-comic scene in which a fox fails to catch a squirrel, which has climbed a tree, and "Fox he humps and scratches and whines and cries, he cries, dig. cause Squirrel won't come down to get killed". (Vietnam, 186) The boys also come across other sights like that of a grizzly eating about two hundred buffalo berries at a time letting "blue juice and red juice out of the sides of Es black wet leather mouth" (Vietnam, 188). But the scene does not remain peaceful for long for it ends with the grizzly killing and devouring a caribou calf.



*Grizzer flips her down again and having had his taste of her live, kills her life now by slamming his teeth through the big muscles of her back right through to the spine...and her death goes over the ridge and slips into the bowl. (Vietnam, 192)*

Seeing the caribou calf thus killed reminds the boys that the jungle is not such an idyllic haven as they had thought it to be. It is ruled by the cruel law of the jungle, where fang and claw predominates. In the savage jungle the boys are initiated into bloodshed and killing.

After their return from the hunt, they get ready to partake in the Vietnam War, and indulge in more killing. But there is a difference. In the jungle they killed animals, but now they will kill people in Vietnamese villages. The hunt that they have participated in, serves as an analogy of the Vietnam War. go and and the wasteful killing of defenceless animals by using high-powered guns emphasizes the unequal and unheroic nature of this war.

Mailer was deeply concerned with the fact that this inglorious war revealed that there was something drastically wrong with the American society which produced frustrated men, who saw in the Vietnam War an opportunity to unleash their sadistic impulses. He was also sharply critical of the moral position of America in its involvement with the Vietnam War.

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