

The Death of the American Dream: H. Thompson's Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail'72

A presidential campaign would be a good place ... to look for the
Death of the American Dream (Thompson 1990: 122)

The presidential elections of 1972 are considered to be one of the most significant in American history, since they were “generally regarded as heralding a fundamental political realignment” (Schofield, Miller, Martin 2003: 217). They meant the ultimate victory of the Republican Party and its return to power on the political stage of the USA. The elections attracted the attention of many political observers, journalists and writers. Among them was Hunter S. Thomson (1937–2005), one of the representatives of New Journalism movement and the creator of gonzo journalism¹. H. Thompson was interested in politics both as a journalist, since he practiced political reportage, and personally – he participated in political campaigns in his home town Aspen. H. Thompson founded the “Freak Power Party”, basing its political platform on several points: prohibition of automobiles, legalization of drugs and renaming Aspen as “Fat City”. Thompson’s serious efforts in political reportage began in 1968, when he covered the Democratic Party conventions that resulted in the article “Chicago–1968”, that was later published in nonfiction collection *Songs of the Doomed* (1990). According to Thompson, being on the edge of financial crisis, he decided to write the book titled “The Death of the American Dream”, and felt that the best way to do it was to write the book about politics. The book was not written, but since then H. Thompson started covering political events regularly. Later the journalist estimated the effect of his political reportage as devastating, writing that

¹ Gonzo journalism is highly subjective writing which resembles journalistic sketches joined together by the image of the narrator who participates in all the described activities

Everything that is wrong-headed, cynical and vicious in me today traces straight back to that evil hour in September of '69 when I decided to get heavily involved in the political process ... (214).

The American dream has long been a central topic to many of H. Thompson's works. The author was preoccupied by the American mythology, national character, American "glorious" past and "dark" future. It can be illustrated even by the titles he gave to his books: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), *Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the 80s* (1989), *Songs of the Doomed: More Notes on the Death of the American Dream* (1990), *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time* (1991), *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman* (1998), *Fear and Loathing in America. The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist* (2001), *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century* (2003), *Hey Rube: Blood Sport, the Bush Doctrine and the Downward Spiral of Dumbness* (2004).

By 1972 H. Thompson was already recognized for his efforts "to find the American Dream". The book that made him famous was *Hell's Angels* where he approached closely to the subject of counterculture and its impact on the American Dream. The writer studied the activities of "Hell's Angels", a well-known Californian motorcycle gang, simultaneously studying the modern state of the "Dream". The factual account of H. S. Thompson's travels and parties with "Hell's Angels" turned into the book tracing the process of myth-making and its further debunking. The journalist, who first treated his characters as the embodiment of the genuine American dream of upward mobility, in the process of his work came to the disruptive conclusion that Hell's Angels are the integral part of American establishment, guilty of diluting the American dream and turning it into the dream of improving the material and social status. Although the book made him widely popular, H. Thompson did not stop in his search for the American dream and this quest resulted in publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. The book represents the journey

of the protagonist and his companion around Las-Vegas that symbolically starts on the edge of the desert (American wilderness). The characters, thus, personify new American Adams ready to pursue their American dream. The author's irony becomes clear, when it turns out that the heroes are suffering from drug hallucinations, and reaches its climax when the characters find the American dream in the casino named Circus-Circus. The protagonist comes to the conclusion that the "dream" in modern America is freedom to gain material wealth by all means, even through fraud and cheat. These two books can be viewed as a platform on which H. Thompson's eventual concept of the "death" of the American Dream was formed.

Fear and Loathing: on the Campaign Trail '72: Some Notes on the Author's Style

In 1972 Thompson was engaged in coverage of primaries of the Democratic Party, and his work resulted in the issue of the nonfiction book *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (1972). Since the moment of its issue, the book aroused controversial reviews both from Thompson's fellow journalists and participants of the primaries. Thus, Frank Mankiewicz, George McGovern's² press secretary, would state that *Fear and Loathing: on the Campaign Trial '72* was "the most accurate and least factual" account of the election (495), implying that H. Thomson in his book presented, on the one hand, the most precise, but, on the other hand, immensely subjective account of the primaries. R. Winterowd in his analysis of the book highlighted its excessive subjectivity and "singular uninformativeness":

... one learns a good deal about the author, very little about his subject. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, for instance, is an intense account of Thompson's prejudices, neuroses, and devotion to alcohol and drugs... (Winterowd 1990: 91)

² One of the candidates from the Democratic Party who eventually lost to Richard Nixon in 1972 elections

Notwithstanding the fact that both critics agree upon subjectivity being the main feature of the book, their attitudes to it vary considerably. Thus, for Mankiewicz such subjectivity is an unquestionable advantage, as far as for R. Winterowd it is seemingly a drawback. The first opinion seems to be more relevant, since stressed subjectivity is one of Thompson's literary devices that the author uses to create grotesque picture of American reality. Besides, the book is a specimen of hybrid genre and can be identified as literary nonfiction, thus it cannot be entirely objective and factual.

Thompson's efforts to create subjective account of Democratic primaries were highly appreciated by George McGovern who described the book as "the most valuable book on the campaign" (490). The writer himself claims the book to be "the bloody product of fifty-five consecutive hours of sleepless, foodless, high-speed editing" (11), referring to his usual way of working on the books. H. Thompson seldom worked on his books for a long time that was typical for all New Journalists. The only exception is his novel *The Rum Diary* that was written during almost thirty years. H. Thompson is also known for not editing his works that is why both his fiction and nonfiction books remind narrator's stream of consciousness that might also be explained by the impact of New Journalism. It's worth mentioning here that the starting impulse of the appearance of New Journalism movement on the literary stage is connected by many critics with the issue of the article titled *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965) by Tom Wolfe. The article was dedicated to automobile show that Tom Wolfe was to cover for *Esquire*. According to Wolfe, after visiting the show, he confessed to the editor Byron Dobell that he was unable to write anything appropriate and they agreed that T. Wolfe would send all the material without editing and someone else would finish the article. Tom Wolfe typed his memorandum, starting with "Dear Byron", for the whole night and eventually it took approximately 40 pages. When the editor got it, he decided to print it in full, omitting only the address. That article became the example of New journalists' work on their texts. H. Thompson would refuse the label "New journalist", preferring "gonzo journalist", but the way of writing "gonzo" he describes in one of his nonfiction collections bears strong re-

semblance to one T. Wolfe used in his New journalism experiments: “buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, as it happened, then send in the notebook for publication – without editing” (Thompson 1979: 106).

Commenting on the genre of his book, the author states: ‘So this is more a jangled campaign diary than a record or reasoned analysis of the ’72 presidential campaign’ (16). What immediately arouses the reader’s attention is the epithet “jangled” that the writer applies to his book. H. Thompson seems to be aware of the impression the book creates among his readers and critics and intentionally attempts to arouse negative emotions. Thus, T.R. Whissen states that:

"Doctor" Hunter S. Thompson is the self-styled journalist who invented, labeled, and defined “gonzo” journalism, the hallmark of which is its ability to see how far one can exceed what we shall call the Puke Factor (or PF). The Puke Factor is the degree to which a book can nauseate the reader (Whissen 1992: 89)

On the one hand, such peculiarity can be explained by the author’s desire to provoke his readers and to attract attention to his creativity. On the other, contemporary reality, according to H. Thompson, is so monstrous and nauseating that there is no other possible way to reflect it in the books.

Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72 imitates the diary; the book is divided into eighteen parts, most of which are called after the months when the described events took place: “December 1971”, “January”, “February”, “March”... “December 1972”. Moreover, each chapter has subtitles that serve as certain “guides” helping the reader to follow H. Thompson’s trips throughout the USA in his attempts to document the primaries. Thus, the book (in common with other works by H. Thompson) besides the diary imitates romance and novel-quest, creating the peculiar synthesis of documentary (diary) and fictional (romance and quest) genres.

But the romance in H. Thompsons creative work turns into self-parody. Knight-errant Thompson (the narrator of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*) turns out to be “stone-drunk from dawn till dusk” (177) and his quest turns into the search for the death of the

“American dream”. Burlesque character of the book is emphasized by the illustrations, representing the caricatures on politicians and electoral delegates, created by Ralph Steadman. It is not the first time H. Thompson cooperates with R. Steadman, the artist illustrated almost all Thompson’s books, including his cult novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. The combination of text and illustrations is bound to highlight the effect the author produces on his readers.

In the foreword the author following the practice of many New journalists explains several aims at writing *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*. One of them is his aversion to taking drugs:

When a man gives up drugs he wants big fires in his life – all night long, every night, huge flames in the fireplace and the volume turned all the way up (19).

H. Thompson seemingly exaggerates his drug addiction. Thus, according to the author his previous book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* was written entirely under drug effect, although the critics agree that the novel is just an imitation of drug delusion. Thompson might be playing with his readers, adopting postmodernist technique.

One more reason for following the pre-election campaign, according to the author, was “to check out the people and find out if they are all swine” (28). Such perception of his contemporaries as “swine” was typical for H. Thompson who would even write the nonfiction book *Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the 80s*. Besides, the author sets upon writing the book

to learn as much as possible about the mechanics and realities of a presidential campaign, and to write about it in the same way I’d write about anything else – as close to the bone as I could get, and to hell with the consequences (14)

The book’s hallmark is its extreme sincerity, which is emphasized by the fact that the author following the example of Norman Mailer and other New journalists introduces the special protagonist – narrator

Hunter Thompson, who is certainly the direct reflection of the writer's personality. That device was common for Thompson who often presented the events in his fiction and nonfiction books through the eyes of Raoul Duke (the pseudonym of the writer under which his *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* first appeared) and Dr. Gonzo. It might be explained, on the one hand, by New Journalism principle of the writer's obligatory participation in the described events, and on the other – by H. Thompson's everlasting aim to create a kind of mythological figure out of himself. It is worth noting that he eventually managed to implement his ambition, since for many of his contemporaries H. Thompson represents cult figure and an embodiment of counterculture and non conformism. In 2008 the documentary film "Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson" appeared, in which many established writers, journalists, actors, representatives of various subcultures and members of H. Thompson's family aired their views on H. Thompson's life, ideals and his role in American reality since 1960-s. It turns out that all too often it is impossible to draw the line between H. Thompson – the writer – and his grotesque, fighting, nonconformist protagonist, because there is almost no distance between them.

Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72 presents Thompson's attitude towards main political figures and politics in general that is utterly critical. Sometimes Thompson's characteristics lack arguments, but they never fail to be sarcastic. For instance, analyzing the chances of the main candidates, the writer creates a kind of gradation of the most inappropriate persona:

Muslie is a bonehead who steals his best lines from old Nixon speeches. McGovern is doomed because everybody who knows him has so much respect for the man that they can't bring themselves to degrade the poor bastard by making him run for President ... John Lindsay is a dunce, Gene McCarthy is crazy, Humphrey is doomed and useless, Jackson should have stayed in bed... (53)

The journalist compares the Campaign of 1972 with “the second day of a Hell’s Angels Labor Day picnic”, describing the primaries as something vicious and chaotic.

The Results of “Roaring Sixties” and the Modern State of the American Dream

Developing the constant topics of his creative work, the journalist in his new book tries not only to reflect upon political life of the USA, but to summarize “roaring sixties” and present his own attitude towards American national character and the concept of the American dream. The genuine American Dream for H. Thompson is closely connected with democracy and freedom. The journalist as one of the main representatives of American counterculture supports the ideas and ideals of “roaring sixties” and is eager to fight for them: “I’m the one who got smacked in the stomach by a billy club at the corner of Michigan and Balboa on the evil Wednesday night four years ago in Chicago” (179). But in the early seventies the writer comes to the realization that eventful and vivid decade will result in “hangover: a whole subculture of frightened illiterates with no faith in anything” (59). The second victory of the Republican Party (the first being Nixon’s victory in 1968) for Thompson means the failure of American Democracy. The journalist foresees this victory and attempts to analyze the grounds for it. According to Thompson the main reason is the “fatigue” of the majority of Americans:

After a decade of left-bent chaos, the Silent Majority was so deep in a behavioral sink that their only feeling for politics was a powerful sense of revulsion. All they wanted in the White House was a man who would leave them alone and do anything necessary to bring calmness back into their lives - even if it meant turning the whole state of Nevada into a concentration camp for hippies, niggers, dope fiends, do-gooders, and anyone else who might threaten the status quo (440).

Another reason is the weakness and vice of the Democratic Party, that after the deaths of John and Robert Kennedy turned into “crippled and bankrupt in all its fronts” (133). The Democratic Party in its modern state arouses writer’s loathing:

That same gang of corrupt and genocidal bastards who not only burned me for six white sharkskin suits eight years ago in South Dakota and chased me through the streets of Chicago with clubs and tear gas in August of ’68, but also forced me to choose for five years between going to prison or chipping in 20 percent of my income to pay for napalm bombs to be dropped on people who never threatened me with anything; and who put my friends in jail for refusing to fight an undeclared war in Asia (216).

Robert Kennedy for H. Thompson represented the ideal and hope for the possible glorious future for the USA. His protagonist, while following the primaries in Washington, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Ohio, Nebraska, California, etc. is haunted by the feeling of R. Kennedy’s presence during the conventions. That makes him return back in his memories to the hopes the whole nation connected with the politician in late sixties:

There is a strange psychic connection between Bobby Kennedy’s voice and the sound of the Rolling Stones. They were part of the same trip, that wild sense of breakthrough the late sixties when almost anything seemed possible. The whole era peaked on March 31, 1968, when LBJ went on national TV to announce that he wouldn’t run for re-election – that everything he stood for was fucked, and by quitting he made himself the symbolic ex-champ of the Old Order. It was like driving an evil King off the throne. Nobody knew exactly what would come next, but we all understood that whatever happened would somehow be a product of the “New Consciousness” (134).

Observing the modern state of the Democratic Party, the protagonist could not but physically sense the feeling of shame Robert Kennedy might have, since the 1972 Democratic campaign mocks his

memory. The protagonist's reflections are by all means the direct expression of the author's position, who thinks that the murders of its best representatives turned the Democratic Party into the "atavistic endeavor – more an Obstacle than a Vehicle" (119) and that the only way to change the situation in America is to destroy the party completely.

Moreover H. Thompson in seventies is so pessimistic about his former ideals and hopes that even Democracy for him loses its attraction:

The main problem in any democracy is that crowd-pleasers are generally brainless swine who can go out on a stage and whup their supporters into an orgiastic frenzy – then go back to the office and sell every one of the poor bastards down the tube for a nickel apiece (121).

The writer feels negative both towards the "Silent Majority" and contemporary state of Democracy in America, but does not propose any meaningful program to change the situation. According to him, contemporary Americans are bound to feel "fear and loathing". This word combination becomes Thompson's manifesto; the writer includes it in all the subtitles. Thus Thompson – the narrator – in December 1971 feels "Fear and Loathing in Washington", in February – "Fear and Loathing in New Hampshire", in March – "Fear and Loathing on the Democratic Left", etc. The very word combination is an allusion to the American dream. For the first time it was used by the author in the title of his cult book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, one of the main themes of which (as it was stated above) was the search for the American dream. The novel has become immensely popular, turning the word combination into nominal; "fear and loathing" for many Americans have become an integral part of the American dream, in the same way as "American tragedy" has entered American national mythology after the issue of the novel of the same name by T. Dreiser.

According to J. Hellman, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* "structurally is a parodic quest book centered around a

symbolic city” (Hellman 1981: 96). The critic means Washington – the city that personifies American political system in general and such concepts as American Democracy and Declaration of Independence. Already in the first chapter, the reader gets acquainted with the hero named Hunter Thompson who starts his eastward journey from his house in Woody Creek, Colorado towards Washington. The hero, according to J. Hellman, reverses “the historical – mythical – literary direction, in order to discover the contemporary reality of a nation that has always moved west in search of a dream” (ib.). Thus the book alongside with the observation of primaries attempts to explain the contemporary state of the country.

H. Thompson comes to the conclusion that the historical development of the USA has always represented negative consequences of the development of the American dream, among which he sees “the White Man’s rape of the American continent” (371) and foreign policy of the USA. The “dream” in its modern condition, according to the author, is an integral part of American establishment, and the establishment is one of the most negative notions in American society. Thompson feels that the American dream is so diluted that one can only witness its “death”:

The ugly fallout from the American Dream has been coming down on us at a pretty consistent rate since Sitting Bull’s time – and the only real difference now, with Election Day ’72 only a few weeks away, is that we seem to be on the verge of ratifying the fallout and forgetting the Dream itself (371).

To justify his idea the writer traces the development of politics in the USA, focusing on the images of political leaders of the country. The Presidents in America used to serve as the personifications of the national ideal, but the situation changed by the 1960s:

Back in 1960 most Americans still believed that whoever lived in the White House was naturally a righteous and upstanding man. Otherwise he wouldn’t be there... This was after 28 years of Roosevelt and Eisenhower who were very close to God. Harry Truman, who had lived a little closer to the Devil, was viewed

more as an accident than a Real President. The shittrain began on November 22nd, 1963, in Dallas – when some twisted little geek blew the President’s head off ... and then a year later, LBJ was re-elected as the “Peace Candidate” (80–81).

According to H. Thompson, since 1963 the nation has been gradually losing respect for fundamentals of American society, namely the Presidency, the White House, the Army, the Government, and as a consequence, it has lead to the “death” of the American dream. The journalist sees the culminating point of this process in the political activities of Richard Nixon. Arguing with those who considered Nixon to be the person who can revive the American dream, Thompson states:

It is Nixon himself who represents that dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character almost every other country in the world has learned to fear and despise (391).

The writer compares Richard Nixon with Barbie doll, emphasizing his artificiality, on the one hand, but typical character of this person, on the other, since Barbie doll for the whole world is personification of “glamorous cover” of the American dream.

The concept of “the death” of the American dream is represented also through the composition of the book. Beside fifteen chapters, narrating about the trips of his protagonist around the country, the author includes three more parts. One of the parts represents the poem *Be Angry at the Sun* (1941) by Robinson Jeffers. The creativity of the poet appealed to H. Thompson that might be explained by the poet’s social and political position: he consciously maintained an attitude of an “outlaw” and claimed the decline of Western values. In his poem R. Jeffers analyzes the contemporary to him state of the USA, encouraging his readers to admit inevitable:

That public men publish falsehoods
Is nothing new. That America must accept
Like the historical republics corruption and empire
Has been known for years... (432).

American reality seems to the author so monstrous and grotesque that the only possibility for the writer is to state the death of the ideals introduced by national rhetoric. The writer traces the death of the “dream” in all the spheres of American life, but politics for him represents the very quintessence of corruption of national idea. Belonging to the world of politics mars the personalities, since “there is no room in American politics for an honest man” (77). H. Thompson finds only several exceptions among American politicians, who oppose to general viciousness. The author sees his ideal in the figures of John and Robert Kennedy, but states that their deaths deprive the USA of the hope for the better future. The author creates gloomy and mysterious atmosphere, announcing that “the ghost of Kennedys past hangs so heavy on this dreary presidential campaign” (91). The effect is highlighted by the peculiar structure of the book, including such parts as “Dark Interlude” and “Epitaph”, and by perpetual repetition of “fear and loathing” metaphor both in the subtitles and the text itself. Notwithstanding the fact that Hunter Thompson admitted in his personal letters that he failed to write the book about the “death of the dream”, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail’72* is read as the book introducing the idea that would become crucial for his later creative work.

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