CHAPTER- 3

BLURRING OF GENRES BY NORMAN MAILER IN THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT AND OF A FIRE ON THE MOON: LITERATURE DEALING WITH CONTEMPORARY EVENTS

The two texts, The Armies of the Night and Of a Fire on the Moon, have been clubbed together in this chapter because in them Norman Mailer uses ‘self’ as the protagonist. He participates in contemporary events and expresses his own feelings, views, and experiences. Mailer, one of the major American authors, had been from the very beginning of his career, painfully conscious of the fundamental absurdities of the age such as: the stockpiling of doomsday weapons to keep the world safe, the brutalities of the World Wars, the quest for God through material acquisitions, and technological advances.

Norman Mailer’s particular genius had been to penetrate the façade of contemporary events, even science, to show us who we are, where we are, and where we are likely to go, pointing up the significant in the most trivial of events, and conversely placing in perspective the truly momentous acts of our time. Mailer always had an urge to comment on psychological, social, and political conditions in the United States. For instance, the Army in The Naked and the Dead, the March to the Pentagon in The Armies of the Night, and a discussion of the Space Program in Of a Fire on the Moon serve as a microcosm of American life and are the basis for Mailer’s vision of America, its people and institutions (Ehrlich141-143).

Some of the major works of journalistic fiction written by Mailer are the long essays like The Faith of Graffiti (1974) and a brilliant recreation of the 1968 conventions in The Idol and the Octopus (1968). Eleven of his 27 major books came during this period. The Armies of the Night is one of his master pieces, about the march to the Pentagon to protest against the Vietnam War.
The Apollo 11 flight to the moon is the subject of *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971). In 1971 he also wrote *The Prisoner of Sex*, is about the debate with the feminists and in 1979 he published, *The Executioner’s Song*, his huge Western epic about the life and death of Gary Gilmore, which he subtitled “a true life novel.” This chapter deals with *The Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, being the best examples of blurring of genres. Norman Mailer was popular for the style known as new journalism. Robert Lowell once called him the ‘best journalist in America’ (AN 33). *The Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, in their book forms, provide literal examples of Mailer’s transforming journalistic material (dealing in real past events) into novels.

This chapter is concerned with how Norman Mailer, in *The Armies of the Night* (Armies), and *Of a Fire on the Moon* (Fire), has employed the tools of narratology, especially character and narration, for the verbal and visual presentation of actual events of his time. These texts have been chosen because they are the most successfully experimental, certainly the most ambitious, and most innovative examples of Mailer’s journalistic fiction. *The Armies of the Night* won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-fiction, and the National Book Award in the category of Arts and Letters. Mailer has, in *Armies*, emphasized the self-conscious manipulation of the authorial role and narrative convention, casting himself as a protagonist able to bridge self and event through action and metaphor. In *Fire*, being unable to capture the meaning of man’s first flight to the moon, he responds by presenting Part II as a book about his writing the book on the moon flight through a subsequent process of intense research and imaginative meditation. In these texts, Mailer discusses the failures, difficulties, and successes faced by him in the representation of ‘reality.’

Norman Mailer’s experiences and texts illustrate various methods for describing modern American reality. The aim here is to study in depth the nature of personalization of the
contemporary events, and the use of third person narration. This study also explores Mailer’s reactions and presentation of the gained experience, during the march to the Pentagon and Apollo 11.

Mailer has stated in *Twentieth Century Authors*, that his goal as a writer is nothing less than “to revolutionize the consciousness of our time” (Kunitz 1955: 658). In his works, distinction between fiction and reality, persona and face, fantasy and confession become uncertain. Through these writings, Mailer is recording man’s quest for identity which goes in two directions, one being the concern for the socio-political sphere, and other being the individual as author. The theme of Mailer’s fiction has remained: the impact of certain events upon a single shaping consciousness. Like Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Ernest Hemingway, Mailer senses that his troubled soul emanates from the troubled soul raging within America. According to Emerson, Mailer in *Armies* tries ‘to prove that the creative writer can exercise a determining influence on the social-political arena’ (Bufithis 89). Similarly, as Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* goes to Pamplona to participate in the running of bulls, Mailer goes to the Pentagon to participate in the march.

While writing *Armies*, Mailer felt that traditional reporting rarely gets at the truth of a situation such as the march to the Pentagon. He feels that reporters do not simply list facts, but retell stories and thereby insert, consciously or not, their own bias and subjective view into their reports. Mailer explains, “Journalistic information available from both sides is so incoherent, inaccurate, contradictory, malicious, even based on error that no accurate history is conceivable” (*Armies* 255).

In 1967, Mailer had remarked, “I feel I’m all washed up. I feel I’m out of it now, it’s passed me by” (Rollyson 202), as he felt dejected when his self-directed movie went unnoticed.
by the public. Then he received a phone call from his longtime friend Mitchell Goodman inviting him to take part in a proposed march on the Pentagon. First being skeptical, and then flattered to speak before a group of 20,000 people, Mailer agreed to participate. He signed a 25,000 dollar book deal, and began writing his personal experiences in book form. As he had done many times before, Mailer decided to write himself out of a low point in his life. But ultimately *Armies*’ style and form resulted in one of the first great works of New Journalism. For Mailer, the goal of writing about the march was to help break the complacency of ‘middle of the road’ Americans, and alert them to the increasingly authoritarian nature of their government. *Armies*’ style communicated that message more successfully than any previous book because of the balance between Mailer’s style and content.

*Armies* is an on the spot account of the march to the Pentagon (the October 1967 anti-Vietnam War rally in Washington DC) experienced personally by the protagonist Norman Mailer making it novelistic in nature, and historical by making an effort to describe the facts. This book is different from other works by Mailer because of its ‘strict enclosure within the limits of a particular event place’ (Bufithis 87), giving it a classical sharpness. In *Armies* ‘the events are shaping the book instead of novels shaping the events’ (Bufithis 87). The book is divided into ‘The Steps of the Pentagon’ (History as a Novel) and ‘The Battle of the Pentagon’ (The Novel as History). It suggests the dual level of Mailer’s interest in composing this work. Book One is concerned with the story of Mailer taking part in the Pentagon demonstration, which is seen by him from “inside.” He describes the whole event profoundly, fully and eloquently, giving a detailed account not only of the demonstration itself but also of his involvement in it.
Armies depicts the problematic relationship between human experience and an actual event which leads to a problematic relationship between report and event. Mailer makes use of a number of narrative concerns. He presents his personal view on what happened on the weekend of the demonstration in the first part, which is about two-third of the length of the book. It begins with Mailer giving a speech at the Ambassador Theater, moving on to depict the burning of draft cards at the Department of Justice, and finally the march to the Pentagon and Mailer’s arrest. The second part is a more objective account of the event, containing several excerpts from newspapers and eye witness reports. It functions as an overview of the demonstration, and as an assessment of how it was treated in the mainstream media.

Just like the other long narratives of Mailer, the structure of Armies is complex. Book One is more extensive than Book Two consisting of four parts: Thursday Evening (subdivided into six sub-parts indicated by numbers and names), Friday Afternoon (four sub-divisions), Saturday Matinee (six), Saturday Night and All of Sunday (eleven). The form and style Mailer chooses are dependent on the character of the object or the event he describes. The documentary elements consist of events, characters, organizations, which are real in the book, like: the peace demonstration in Washington and the Pentagon in November 1967 (the action, space, time), the people taking part in it (Mitchell Goodman, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Noam Chomsky, the leaders of the peace movement, e.g. the Chaplain at Yale, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Dr. Spock, David Dellinger, Jerry Rubin, and demonstrators Mailer meets and all the politicians he speaks about), peace groups and organizations (socialist splinter parties, the Revolutionary Contingent, trade unions, the Communist Party, etc.), the social and political background to the event, negotiations of the Mobilization Committee organizing the march on the Pentagon with the government and the author’s thoughts presented to the reader.

The fictional elements in Armies include: two descriptions of the whole march, each handled in a different way; the constant interruption of the narrative continuity by thoughts and meditations; the presentation of the narrators. Bufithis states, in Contemporary Literary Criticism, ‘Armies is novelistic because it sensitively describes the effects of the march on a participant-protagonist, Norman Mailer, and historical because it scrupulously describes the facts of the march’ (1979: 343). The subject-matter of Armies is entirely represented by the facts drawn from reality while fictional features can be found mainly among the structural devices.

Mailer has been constantly changing ways of referring to “himself” in the third person: “Mailer” in Armies, “the reporter” in Miami and the Siege of Chicago, and “Aquarius” in Fire. Mailer has placed himself at the centre of his narrative action. He has attempted to become the personification of America himself. In Armies Mailer presents the great peace demonstration which took place in Washington, D.C., and at the Pentagon in October 1967. He depicts his reactions to one of the vast anti-Vietnam demonstrations of various peace groups. Using his own character, which is filled with funny representations, Mailer gives a more detailed, complex, and truthful account of his experiences. The first section of Armies is more of a novel than history
and of greatest literary interest depicting Mailer’s artistry rather than reporting ability. *Armies* shows the events of history and television screen, and at many places, we find ourselves as other minor real life characters. Here Mailer is trying to answer the question that: Can a mid-twentieth century man maintain a semblance of integrity and hope in the midst of brutalities and absurdities that surround him?

Mailer in the form of a Historian or the Novelist offers the facts to the reader. He sometimes, comments on some formal elements, but usually remains behind the scene and behaves as an omniscient narrator and self-conscious writer. Book One, History as a Novel, is narrated by the Novelist, while Book Two, The Novel as History, is presented by the Historian:

The Novelist in passing his baton to the Historian has a happy smile .... Let us prepare then (metaphors soon to be mixed — for the Novelist is slowing to a jog, and the Historian is all grip on the rein) let us prepare then to see what the history may disclose. (Book Two)

Mailer’s narration seemed so credible because he dealt with all the important aspects of his character in conjunction with the complexity of events surrounding the march to the Pentagon. In other words, his original aim in *The Naked and the Dead* to show the convergence of character and society was amply demonstrated in a mature, comic, and subtle way through *Armies*. Mailer played many roles in *Armies*, first as an author or novelist, then as a participant, historian, observer, and the Beats (name for his temperamential self). Characterization of Mailer as ‘Mailer’ in *Armies* is most extraordinary and engaging. To describe his personality in *Armies*, he uses many adjectives: foolish, vain, inspired, deluded, imaginative, energetic, generous, and quixotic.
The choices he made, using language as his tool, show the smooth transition of sentence patterns, narrative rhetoric, and meta-discursive features. These attempts were in order to create two characters, the participant and the observer, each with his own level of involvement in the events and with readers. Through a number of characters such as “the Beats” (*Armies* 30), “a poor man’s version of Orsen Welles” (*Armies* 32), “Prince of Bourbon” (*Armies* 33), “fatally vulgar” (*Armies* 44), Mailer has proved that his public personality is an artificial construction. Forster states that the character of Mailer in *Armies* is “a gallery of sharply intimate verbal cartoons” (1968: 30). In *Armies*, Mailer has constructed a colorful collection of character sketches and memorable portraits; giving real-life characters both comic and symbolic dimensions. Joseph Wenke also argues: “of greatest significance is Mailer’s ability to develop out of the character sketch a series of associations that reveal with lyrical brilliance the character of contemporary America itself” (1957: 153).

*Armies* has no doubt, constructed its historical and political scene as an allegory of America itself, but it has also not lost its sense of the harsh realities of the march to the Pentagon. The plot of *Armies* is believed to be a real plot which shows Mailer changing into a politically active participant who understands that he should write reportage about what he saw and experienced. Urinating on a bathroom floor, taunting an audience, confronting an American Nazi, all are expressions of Mailer’s ‘Beast’ in *Armies*. Mailer also shares his personal experience of the fears and temptations of the protesters who remained at the Pentagon. He feels that their number is reduced to hundreds from thousands, as they are fearful of being beaten after arrest. Mailer describes his experience as “a rite of passage … a black dark night which began in joy, near foundered in terror, and dragged on through empty apathetic hours while glints of light came to each alone” (*Armies* 120).
This transformation in his character can also be proved by an argument given by Phelan, who states: “Mailer’s book represents a thematic character progression, where a comic, inept, and unreliable protagonist grows, in the course of the narrative, to be a more mature and intellectual character whose political opinions should be taken seriously” (1989: 194). According to Laura Adams’s Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer, Armies is the story of the “growth of Norman Mailer.” Also according to Phelan’s reading, the narrative of Book one of Armies tells the story of Mailer’s alteration from the egotist to the more modest man who is transformed by the event, and in this way Mailer the character makes the passage from ignorance to knowledge (ibid.: 195).

Characters fulfill different roles in a narrative, and it is useful to distinguish between characters in terms of these functions (Prince 1982: 72). Different labels and concepts have been used in the discussion of literary characters: “There are round characters, flat characters, the stock characters, the fool, the protagonist, the hero, main characters, minor characters, static characters, developing characters and so on” (Olsen 1978:109) and most of these types are represented in Armies, being both psychologically “round” and allegorically “flat,” and “developing,” according to Phelan. Zavarzadeh in Mythopoeic Reality asserts that E. M Forster’s concept of “flat” and “round” characterization, the notion of plot, and the effect of suspense can have no relevance to a work that is about actual people (80). Moreover, to support his assertion about characterization, he opposes William Gass’s observation that characters are “made by words, out of words” to Oscar Lewis’s statement that in the nonfiction novel they “are not constructed types but are real people” (80-81).

Mailer in an experimental way uses third person for himself as seen in, Thackeray’s novel Henry Esmond, Pynchon’s short story “Entropy,” and Henry Adam’s autobiographical
*The Education of Henry Adams*. *Armies* uses a similar theme and devices as used by Nabokov in his novel, *The Eye*, in which the themes throw light on the narrator’s self-conscious observation of his own activities. In writing about himself in the third person, Mailer creates two versions of himself: Mailer as character, and Mailer as author. Mailer gives the fictional ‘Mailer’ a full breadth of emotions as well as a complexity that makes him more than just a literary tool. Through the ‘Fictional Mailer’ we are given an insight into the moods of Mailer like how he felt while he was drunk, how he felt being hung over, his feelings at seeing the young men turn in their draft cards, or what it is like to be in jail.

*Armies* is a hybrid combining the features of autobiography, history, journalism, and the novel. For Estelle Jelinek, *Armies* is “an effort to combine history and autobiography” (1986: 179). Jelinek finds Mailer’s experimental way of referring to himself in the third person to be a disturbing sign of masculine egotism, but it can be a sign of a “different” kind of men’s autobiographical writing in tune with Mailer’s own philosophy.

Mick Short mentions *Armies* as the typical example in which blurring the borders between fiction and reality has come to be referred to as ‘faction.’ Although the march really took place, and Mailer was in it, he adopts a third-person narrator and refers to himself in the third-person (1996: 260). The range of style Mailer uses in *Armies* also proves that the book is on the borderline between journalism and fiction, because of the use of character in a creative manner. Other accounts of the events, whether from other participants or from the mass media, temper the author’s opinions and allow the accounts to take the form of what Geertz calls “documentaries that read like confessions”-- a case of genre blurring (1983: 20).

Critically, Mailer was receiving much better reviews for his journalistic pieces, and being considered as a journalist. As Tom Wolfe points out in *New Journalism*, it was a commonly
accepted axiom that “the novelist was the reigning literary artist, now and forever” (Wolfe 1973: 28). Mailer while keeping himself at the centre of the text, attempts to examine the varying merits of the novelistic and historical forms of writing. In the final paragraph of Book One, Mailer discusses the problem with his historical account:

It insisted on becoming a history of himself over four days, and therefore was history in the costume of a novel. He labored in the aesthetic of the problem for weeks, discovering that his dimensions as a character were simple: blessed had been the novelist, for his protagonist was a simple of a hero and a marvel of a fool .... Yet in writing his personal history of these four days, he was delivered a discovery of what the March on the Pentagon had finally meant, and what had been won and what had been lost. (1968 a: 241)

In ‘The Novel as History’ the whole event is watched from outside, at a great distance, and from the point of view of a journalist, or a documentary-prose writer called by Mailer as the Historian. The role of the Historian is to concentrate upon the work of many organizers and reactions to the demonstration in the newspapers, then analyse the fragments of the reportages he quotes, compare them, and try to search for the truth. In ‘History as a Novel,’ on the contrary, the Novelist concentrates upon Mailer, a participant in the demonstration, and the four days he devotes to it, who is a sensitive observer and a witness to the peace demonstration. This absorbing narrative is at times interrupted by the protagonist’s inner thoughts, and creates a commentary to things depicted.

In Armies, the distance between the character and the narrator is not purely temporal; Mailer emphasizes the distinct identities of the two by frequently using a plural pronoun. For instance, the first book begins with the sentence, “From the outset, let us bring you news of your
protagonist‖ (3). The “us” here is the voice of the narrator. This voice can directly address the reader—“you” and “your” refers to the reader. He has presented it to us from his own point of view. Mailer as the participant is different from Mailer as the observer. This is clear when we examine the differences in his relationships with the reader and the events taking place, lexical features, tenor of discourse, and narrative rhetoric.

Mailer cautiously presents his goal as the observer. He gives an insight into the events and at the same time, introduces us to the historical aspects of the march, yet remaining objective and informing us. Although Mailer shifts his attention from one person to another, from one object to another, he never forgets to remain on the outskirts of the situation as an observer. Yet when he is the participant, Mailer positions himself closer to the audience, giving an insight into his character and his mind frame. The personal tenor of discourse becomes obvious through statements he makes about himself, like “he knew suddenly then he had less fear now than when he was a young man,” that “in some part of himself at least, he had grown,” and he “felt a confirmation of the contests of his own life” (Armies 113-114).

The first person account used by Mailer clarifies reasons for such accounts of historical events being limited and flawed. From his position on the frontline of demonstrators during the Saturday March, Mailer feels helpless as he cannot see what is happening, and acknowledges his state of ignorance to his readers. Being thrown into jail so early that weekend, he cannot report on subsequent events. Jennifer Bailey describes Mailer’s approach in theatrical terms: “Like a good actor, the personae of Mailer’s writing must be able to sift and select from the context of their acting in order to convey the truth of a situation” (1979: 88). The melting down of literary forms is an essential quality of the style of Armies --the narrative voice is inextricably linked to
the form of the book and, in Bailey’s terms, the narrator is able to “sift and select” from the contexts in which he finds himself. In a review of *Armies*, Alvarez concluded that

[Mailer] has taken a fragment of contemporary history in which he played a part, presented it with all its attendant force, muddled argument and jostling power plays, and made it an internal scenario in which all the conflicting, deadening facts take on new consciousness as an artist. (1968: 362 - 63)

Mailer’s authorial narrative voice conveys his social reality. He is not an invisible narrator, but one who is intrusive, who insists on his view of the world.

*Armies* is a social and political mirror reflecting the views of those who were against the Vietnam War, and also citing reasons for the same, like the increased tax rates to fund the war. Along with social significance, historical significance is prominent throughout the book. It is visible when the plan to march into Washington is explained. Mailer gives details of the plan and also explains what occurred during the march. The Vietnam War was a very significant point in United States’ history and those on the home-front like Norman Mailer and other key persons were equally historically significant. Alfred Kazin in an article, “The Trouble He’s Seen”, in *The New York Times Book Review*, called it “A work of personal and political reportage that brings to the inner and developing crisis of the United States at this moment admirable sensibilities, candid intelligence, the most moving concern for America itself. Mailer’s intuition in this book is that the times demand a new form. He has found it.”

Mailer through journalistic fiction also wants the public to understand that the real events cannot be reduced to newscast or to newsprint. His literature provides the multiplex nature of experience. His prose is convoluted, filled with continuous rise and fall of soul, and quite energetic. *Armies* is a counter thrust against mass media. Mailer’s thoughts have also
transformed as he believes the celebrity and the common man to be equally interesting. This book is rich with brilliantly discerning portraits of the American character. In the last paragraph, Mailer expresses his concern for America now being horribly diseased because of her involvement in the Southeast Asia war, which earlier was a beauty of magnificence unparalleled (Bufithis 94). Mailer sees the Vietnam War as a way for the “insane […] center of America” to work out its tacit need for brutal expression (Armies 188). This battle is for Mailer a contest of the right of expression against the brutality of the war. Armies is thus an example of moral individuals confronting centers of power both as a physical protest and literary dissent.

Because Armies describes an actual event using the novelists’ tools like metaphor, imagery, and dialogue, the potential for readers to remember the event the way Mailer describes is greater, than the dry “objectivity” of traditional print sources. Instead of just passing over the event as a small hiccup in history, Mailer chooses to describe, the march as important as the Civil War, so that in a few decades, “the event may loom in our history large as the ghosts of the Union dead” (88). Mailer rewrites the history of the event in the way he wishes, claiming that his account, although subjective, has as much validity as the other more supported accounts of the march. Mailer felt that by his literary style he could do more for the cause against the war. This tradition, of a well-researched writing and keeping self in the center by Mailer, was continued in his next work of journalistic fiction.

After a few years, in July 1969, Mailer’s attention was drawn to another historical event - the first step of a man on the moon, which lead to the writing of Of a Fire on the Moon. This text is most basically described as an account of Apollo 11 from the perspective of an author-journalist Norman Mailer. The book concentrates on the events of the mission as well as on Mailer’s own thoughts and questions brought up by Apollo. It was written in a deal with Life
magazine to allow him to cover Apollo 11. To make the book more interesting, and so as to add a distinctive element non-existent in the vast majority of books on Apollo, Mailer uses a completely different perspective than the personnel at NASA. The book is more a source for the opinions of one man than for technical information on the mission itself as he focuses much more on his own thoughts and views.

*Fire* is about the poet Aquarius, Mailer’s persona, commissioned by a magazine to write a factual description of the moon-shot. Mailer is respectful to the power of the event and ‘NASA-land,’ “the very center of technological reality” (47) which is almost overwhelming in its power, its complexity, and its effectiveness. But at the same time, he is more repelled by than attracted, to the marvels of science and its technological creations. Mailer calls NASA land to be “an empty country filled with wonders” (103). This book is another example in which he thrusts his egotism, self-display, and his shortcomings upon the readers, both to show his essential honesty as well as his unexpected strengths.

In a very unique way, discussing his reaction to the death of Hemingway, Mailer starts this book with details about the space program, and refers to events of his own personal life, including his divorce, Vietnam, and his experience with marijuana. This is quite distracting and takes the reader away from the focus of the book. But it is equally important to provide context, and add an interesting outlook on a story that has been told many times before in a more traditional manner.

In *Armies*, Mailer is quite ‘visible,’ exposed and central to his fiction, but at times it seems that he is exhausted because of his style of focusing himself at the front. ‘He had been left with a huge boredom about himself. He was weary of his own voice, own face, person, persona, will, ideas, speeches, and general sense of importance’ (*Fire* 5). In works like *Miami and the
Mailer makes use of third person narrative where the artist is ‘like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, pairing his fingernails’ (qtd. in Radford 120).

*Fire*, of which three sections have appeared in *Life*, continues the third-person narrative device in the figure of “Aquarius.” In this context, Mailer writes

> If we approach our subject via Aquarius, it is because he is a detective of sorts, and different in spirit from eight years ago. He has learned to live with questions. Of course, as always, he has little to do with the immediate spirit of the time, which is why Norman on this occasion may call himself Aquarius. Born January 31, he is entitled to the name, but he thinks it a fine irony that we now enter the Aquarian Period since he has never had less sense of possessing the age. (*Fire* 184)

Mailer is somewhat pessimistic here. For him the “fine irony” is that as the United States is moving towards its greatest achievement, the conquest of the moon and the country seems to be disintegrating. In this regard, Mailer recounts his own battles, the unsuccessful one for Mayor of New York, and the financial pressure which led him to accept a lucrative offer from his old enemy, *Time-Life*.

Usually in Mailer’s fiction a structural division and reflection between separate parts happens inside a work which contains two or three books. In *Fire* Mailer has constructed the plot into three major parts: the second middle part, the largest, is accompanied and supported by two other parts, the first and the third. So as to make a temporal and thematic sense, the first and third parts even being separate stories, have an integral role in the narrative. The first part, “Aquarius,”
defines Aquarius’ position as a journalistic observer and the would-be writer of the book; the third part, “the Age of Aquarius,” is the last part in which Mailer depicts coverage of the mission, written sitting in front of the television, presenting his thoughts about the meaning of it all. Mailer gives about 300 pages to describing the mechanics of Apollo 11 in the second part, which is supposedly the longest ever description of an event. The long middle part, “Apollo,” tells the main story about the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. It contributes more in baffling and amazing the reader who is not a space engineer (Bufithis 101). There is a change in the perspective of Mailer as soon as he is in the belly of NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) and becomes a technocrat who details the reader about the intricate mechanical grandeur of the Apollo-Saturn rocket.

When critically juxtaposing Fire with Armies, Robert Merrill also finds certain “superficial” self-reflexivity in “this [three-part] structure [which] seems to resemble that of Mailer’s better essays, in which he begins and ends with his own relation to an event described in the middle” (1992: 137-138). Chris Anderson, on the other hand, stresses that the narrative of Fire is constructed progressively, which means that the work as a whole provides three “growing” viewpoints and versions of the subject matter:

Each of the three parts is a different approach to the same material, as if Mailer starts over three times and offers us three different versions of the same book— the first, “Aquarius,” an account of his writing of the piece; the second, “Apollo” a more conventional, journalistic account of the mission itself; the third, “The Age of Aquarius,” a poetic meditation on what the mission in the end might mean. […] each section is progressively tighter and more synthetic, an increasingly more satisfying mastering of the material. (1987: 90)
The plot of *Fire* is the plot of NASA-land i.e. to go to the moon and return. But the inability of the NASA and astronauts to explain the reasons of their landing on the moon itself suggests the failure of this plot. This failure was felt by Aquarius as well as the people who looked at its climax on television. The actual plot emerges as a conflict between science and poetry, NASA and Aquarius. *Fire* is a stunning achievement due to its most impressive and detailed description of the sections dealing with the Vehicle Assembly Building at Cape Kennedy, the blast-off of Saturn–Apollo, and the craters of the moon.

This book is abundant with technological details of the complexity, power, and realities of the NASA-land. Mailer shows the NASA-land to be full of machines, rather computers, which have millions of parts, with prefect designs for smooth conduction, buildings being gigantic like cathedrals, and other minute descriptions making the chapters all the more interesting. Mailer tries to put in every detail of the flight he has monitored. The poet Aquarius believes that no one can remain unimpressed when the great rocket leaves the launching pad to journey into space. Mailer makes use of both technical details as well as his imagination so as to link it to the human world.

The second plot of the narrative, apart from the moon flight, is the process of becoming of the book. Mailer believes that the writing of scientific events “begins with legends and oversimplifications” but then “the same ground is revisited, details are added, complexities are engaged, unanswerable questions begin to be posed” (*Fire* 155). Mailer “goes through the most crucial events of the moon voyage and landing twice, first imaginatively outside and then inside the events” (Landow 1986: 147). So Mailer holds that a nonfictional story can be told again and again, without ever being completed; with details to be added every time it is told. Similar to this, Mailer’s notion in *Armies* is that “an explanation of the mystery of events at the Pentagon
cannot be developed by the methods of history – only by the instincts of the novelist” (*Armies* 255). In the long middle section of “Apollo,” Mailer is “insisting that the strangeness and complexity of the world can never be adequately accounted for by a strictly rationalistic epistemology” (Wenke 1987: 178). Aquarius also concludes that to cope with the large variety of confusing daily experiences, “the services of the Novelist” must be added to the Navigator (*Fire* 157).

The ending of *Fire* leaves the reader unsatisfied. Aquarius is in the Manned Spacecraft Center at Houston sniffing away at a small moon rock hermetically sealed within two layers of glass, giving no conclusion. Mailer seems to have discovered more about astronauts than about the moon. Astronauts are pioneers but at the same time their language is stale, cliché-ridden, infused with ‘computerese’ (Bufithis 103). They are ‘saints’ as well as ‘robots’ and have become living tools of NASA. They are not rebellious and unalienated. Mailer here has imaged the Devil as the embodiment of “electronic, plastic, surgery and computer” (*Fire* 469).

Describing astronauts, Mailer says that these astronauts are kept behind the glass screens so as to protect them from germs, and could be seen always from a distance. They interchange their roles with the others and function effectively, and can change their parts like machines they design and operate. The decisions taken are of the group and not the individuals. There is a vast bureaucracy, a host of contractors, an army of scientists and engineers, who work day and night like machines devoid of emotions, not giving space to any kind of friction between them. Mailer even calls them ‘WASPs.’ One of the astronauts, Neil Armstrong, is the type-character, coming from a small town of Ohio, being poor in the beginning, hardworking, full of determination, having courage to face all difficulties, and who now has become the biggest of all pay-offs and
the first man to walk on the moon. These astronauts wear plastic helmets and protective space suits being the ultimate impressions of the scientific man.

Further, Mailer talks about the language used by the astronauts which is the language of the ‘impersonal world of technology.’ Kernan calls this language to be ‘so neat, so flatly delivered, so patently manufactured on Madison Avenue for the event that it reverberated with not even the slightest heartfelt spontaneous delight of a man doing something truly extraordinary’ (qtd. in Harold Bloom 149). Mailer focuses on the use of jargon in NASA-land i.e. “computerese.” The use of “we” is discouraged. “A joint exercise has demonstrated” becomes the substitution. “Other choices” becomes “peripheral secondary objectives.” “Doing our best” is “obtaining maximum advantage possible.” “Confidence” becomes “very high confidence level.” “Ability to move” is “mobility study.” “Turn off” is “disable,” “turn on” becomes “enable.” Some other technical terms used are EVA for “extra-vehicular activity.” PTC meant “passive thermal control.” VAB stood for Vehicle Assembly Building. Computers were at the heart of Apollo 11. Finally, Mailer has to agree that NASA being so consistent and coherent intensely is in a condition of Homeostasis and needs no purpose outside itself.

Not only Mailer but Collins (the astronaut) also has doubts about why they are landing on the moon, “It’s been one of the failings of the Space Program … that we have been unable to delineate clearly all the reasons why we should go to the moon” (Fire 243). Thus turning towards its own composition and meaning-making, Fire tries to make sense of our “unreal” reality, foregrounding the problems of representing it, and implying its own failures to succeed completely in this complex project.

In this work the central dramatic struggle is Mailer’s attempt to transform the event into his book. The effort is to bring the world of fiction to a factual event, that is, re-creating and
exploring an event in one’s consciousness and finding a meaningful shape and substance. Part I of the book indicates that Mailer finds the Apollo mission particularly suitable to his character and methods. As a journalist “It would be as easy to go to the Amazon to study moon rocks as to write a book about these space matters, foreign to him, which everyone would agree is worth a million dollars” (Fire 6-7).

*Fire* is the result of reconstruction from the secondary materials, NASA manuals and transcripts, interviews, and television. Mailer says “Aquarius was in no command module preparing to go around the limb of the moon, burn his rocket motors and brake into orbit, no, Aquarius was installed in the net of writing about the efforts of other men” (Fire 260). It is a novel told entirely in an unrelentingly close first-person narrative. Some sections include no reference to who is currently being referred to as the protagonist.

It was the subject he had not thought about since graduating in aeronautical engineering from Harvard. Many critics thought that Mailer’s personal philosophy was not ready to easily accommodate the role of technology. Hillary Mills, in *Mailer: A Biography*, states that Mailer was reluctant to write on this subject as it was “beyond the boundaries of his own first-hand observation, and the closest he ever came to the moon was, as we all know, his television screen (354).

Like *Armies*, *Fire* searches for an appropriate form and vision in order to communicate its complex idea and message, although it also never achieves any final answer or closure. In the last pages of *Fire*, Aquarius experiences a kind of metamorphosis or transformation in himself, finally turning technical and scientific explanations into poetic and metaphorical ones. As John Hellmann puts it, Mailer constructs the third part of the book, “The Age of Aquarius,” as “the search of its author-protagonist for an ending, a final meaning, to the book and its subject”
On the last page of the book Mailer-Aquarius is seeking some starting point, some coherence, and a clarifying metaphor which would work as a “key” to the whole. This last part of the text also suggests that it is an age of endings and new beginnings. This is symbolized when Aquarius and his old friends gather for the burial of an old car, a representative of the technology of the past, of this age, and of the space program, but that car is painted to be “an artifact,” and is entitled “Metamorphosis” (*Fire* 464), still in a hope for both the past and the future.

To make it more practical and realistic, Mailer modifies his romantic vision of heroism turning towards accommodating it to the astronauts, and the purposes of the space program. But by the end of writing Mailer is about to transform “After the moonshot, this was the first time I thought that maybe they were gonna win because they *deserved* to win, because they have been working harder at their end of the war, than we have” (Mills 352). Aquarius has a feeling that it is “a meaningless journey to a dead arena in order that men could engage in the irrational activity of designing machines which would give birth to other machines which would travel to meaningless places . . .” (*Fire* 260).

*Fire* has represented science in the forms of NASA and Apollo 11. Here Mailer’s aim is to give a lively as well as factual detail of the moon landing, which he has done very perfectly but can’t help criticizing the mission for its meaning and banality. For him, “something was lacking, some joy, some outrageous sense of adventure” (*Fire* 260). The interesting aspect of this book is that Mailer makes an attempt to give the form of literature to otherwise non-romantic, flat, facts of science. Actually, it is the coming together of a poet and the technicality of the mechanical world lacking in mystery and any kind of subjectivity, all these features being strange to prose writing.
No doubt Mailer has dealt with many real events in the past in his nonfiction like *Armies, The Naked and the Dead, Why are We in Vietnam*, but dealing with this kind of reality handicapped him since the beginning of writing this assignment. Because he couldn’t avoid the facts of NASA preventing the use of his own fictional world as well as his literary techniques, so he calls this book and this mission of its writing “the Armageddon of Poetry” (*Fire* 150). Mailer impresses upon the difficulty he is finding in the expression of the subject. For him all what is happening in *Of a Fire on the Moon* is ineffable. He writes that the reporting on this process is “too complex to be reported for daily news stories by passing observers” (*Fire* 88). When this happens the actual demonstration of Mailer’s subject shifts to the subject of writer, and his relationship to the audience. Mailer finds himself in a difficult rhetorical situation. The experience of moon shot is “almost impossible to write about,” (*Fire* 4) being so peculiar and complex. Mailer also feels that conventional journalistic techniques like interviewing “could be misleading.” Mailer will “approach” the astronauts “via Aquarius” (*Fire* 4). Mailer discusses such problems in *Armies* also. For him, the march to the Pentagon is “an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever” (*Armies* 67).

It is observed that his narrative is eschewed by the hard facts in forwarding the verbatim transcripts of the research in the NASA-land. Mailer puts in an artist on the scene, a persona of the poet Aquarius who has “learned to live with questions” (*Fire* 4). Aquarius is very old-fashioned, very standard romantic poet, who has landed in a world although real but for him, full of mystery and uncertainty. He is quite suspicious of reason and science, and has a great distrust of machinery. Mailer describes the people in and outside NASA-land, giving a careful description of the objects with variety and accuracy, using his excellent craftsmanship. Along
with that he also analyses his own thoughts and feelings so as to give meaning to the landing on
the moon, and bind the abstract world of science to the world of men.

To Christ Anderson, *Fire* appears to be the most representative of Mailer’s journalistic
fictions as it is his most self-reflexive work. He also comments “rather than write about his
subject, [Mailer] writes about his writing about the subject,” and “[t]he process of writing the
book becomes the subject of the book” (1987: 92). Anderson also observes that Mailer “often
tells the story of his effort to word the wordless; unable to describe the event itself, he describes

His skepticism is visible from the very first question he asks the first person to be
interviewed at NASA, Dr. Robert R. Gilruth: “Are you worried, Dr. Gilruth that landing on the
moon may result in all sorts of psychic disturbances for us here on earth?” (*Fire* 350) The
buildings of NASA are bleak and windowless, usually placed in some barren setting, its
atmosphere air-conditioned, its procedures developed from abstract rules rather than from human
needs. Mailer contemplates often on “the psychology of machines,” and what this infusion of
technology means to humanity on a metaphysical level. This question captures Mailer’s
imagination, and therefore this is generally what he focuses on during the novel.

In *Armies*, Mailer suggests that America has lost its soul to “a worship of technology,”
for Vietnam is a technological war which aims paradoxically to destroy the mystery that is at the
core of America itself as a Christian nation- America is burning “the bleeding heart of Christ” in
Vietnam (*Armies* 188). Similarly, Aquarius contemplates before the launching of the rocket:
“Man was voyaging to the planets in order to look for God. Or was it to destroy Him?” (*Fire* 79)
Mailer also writes “was the voyage of Apollo 11 the noblest expression of a technological age, or
the best evidence of its utter insanity?” (*Fire* 382) Hilton Kramer in ‘Book World’ wrote “This
fundamental ambivalence about the role of technology in the future of human culture is the crux of Mailer’s book.” Alfred Kazin also perceives that *Fire* is “a book about a novelist trying to write instant history” (238).

Moreover, it is clear that a muted autobiography of Norman Mailer runs through his works. *Armies* is a big novel about America, a work which has been his proclaimed ambition to write for the last 10 years. It is a successful and reaffirmed attempt of the novelistic approach to experience. ‘Mailer’ in *Armies*, gives a subjective vantage point to express his concerns about America. He has enriched the narrative with various novelistic devices and creative reconstruction. Mailer departs from the ‘fetish with factology’ (*Armies* 99).

While appreciating the writing style of Mailer, David Lodge, in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, says that ‘the effect upon his style is to open his paragraphs to a great variety of tones and vocabularies, each modifying and competing with the others …’ (1975: 322). Mailer’s presentation of himself as a character in *Armies* and *Fire* has been interpreted by Charles Nicol: ‘he was not so much trying to establish the importance of art and the artist in the public imagination as he was trying to create self-recognition in that imagination’ (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 1980: 323).

In the process of altering the contemporary consciousness, Mailer changed his method and started writing about himself as a central character. According to Laura Adams, as stated in an article in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ‘To attempt to separate Mailer’s art from his life is to invite the question, “What is his art if not the creation of himself?”’ (1979: 340) It can be interpreted that during this period of growth, Mailer’s life and art grew together significantly. Mailer’s hero or the hero of the age we are living in, is a normal human being ‘who rises above the beast in himself, to outweigh and redeem his failures’ (Ibid. 341).
It has been observed that these narratives have, through the use of tools of character and narration, concentrated on the man vs. machine dilemma, not in the autonomy vs. manual operational aspect of this class, but in the core metaphysical ramifications of this battle on the future of mankind. Mailer first discusses the political event of the march to the Pentagon in *Armies*, then brings Apollo 11 into the context of the counter-culture 60’s, and lets us know exactly what he thought about it. Mailer’s ego seems to get in the way and his thoughts are quite disdainful. The questions he raises are valuable, and the reader cannot help but contemplate his or her own responses. Through this way of depicting things it can be interpreted that the events are developing a style and structure almost impossible to write about. In each of Mailer’s journalistic work, the focus on the consciousness of characters as they view facts, rather than the objective view of facts, provides an underlying unity to this literature.

Mailer has tried to bridge the gap between journalism and literature. In *Armies* Mailer reiterates his sense of the importance of literary contributions in shaping the events of the day and in the power of imagination as a source of transcendence. For instance, early in *Armies*, he tries to dismiss the need for his own active involvement in the protest activities by pointing out that “one’s own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam” (*Armies* 9). Summing up his life-long new-journalistic writing in a sentence, Mailer says that “it’s all fiction,” and further contends that “the historian and the novelist are both engaged in writing fiction,” with the only difference being “that the historian uses more facts, although they can never be numerous enough to enclose the reality” (*The Spooky Art* 154). It was also true that after *Fire*, Mailer gave up the style of third person writing, as he was worn out by it and says “I didn’t like my own person in it-I felt I was highly unnecessary” (qtd. in *Mailer: A Biography* 355). He also, after *Fire*, didn’t make any attempt at journalistic writing.