

The “Most Accurate, Least Factual” Writer:

Hunter S. Thompson, Journalist

by

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New Journalism, as practiced by Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, and other writers, loosened the accepted bounds of journalism in the 1960s. Embracing these unrestricted journalism practices, Hunter S. Thompson adapted the New Journalists' techniques and added some of his own to create Gonzo Journalism. A mix of satire, dark humor, and parody, Gonzo focused on the persona telling the story rather than the events that the writer on which was supposed to be reporting. Objectivity, the mainstay of traditional reporting in the 20th century, was not the goal in Gonzo. Thompson's writing more closely resembled the news writing that came before the rise of objectivity. Today, Thompson's influence on the modern media has led the way for satirical news programming such as *The Colbert Report* and publications like *The Onion*. Thompson's writing was also the also a forbearer of the modern polarized media. People who read his reportage understood that they were getting a story from his point-of-view; similarly, shows like *Fox News* provide the news from a certain viewpoint.

The "Least Factual, Most Accurate" Writer:

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Preface

Hunter S. Thompson (1937-2005) was a writer who has been a curiosity for readers and critics for his unconventional habits and distinctive writing style. He was, according to Frank Mankiewicz, George McGovern's campaign manager in 1972, the "least accurate, most factual" writer because, while he often employed fiction and exaggeration in his writing, his observations remain an accurate depiction of the events he described—even today, forty years after his writing became mainstream. However, only few writers have studied his works critically, and often those observations only serve to compare his work to that of other journalists. None of these critics explain the value of Thompson's writing nor demonstrate how his work has influenced other writers and journalists.

To understand his influence, it is important to look at the era in which Thompson wrote. The world-changing events of the 1960s brought about New Journalism. This creative style of reportage was a new way to not only describe the events that were happening, but also give readers a deeper understanding of emotional atmosphere surrounding those events. Thompson's writing similarly worked to provide the story behind the story and his creative allowances made him comparable to other writers of the time period—writers like Tom Wolfe, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. Because of this, critics often grouped Thompson together with the New Journalists. However, despite using many similar methods to the New Journalists, the idiosyncrasies of Thompson's writing greatly differed from that of other writers.

Exploring the evolution of Thompson's writing shows how he developed his particular style of reportage, known as "Gonzo" Journalism. "Gonzo" was Thompson's way of presenting grotesque events of a time period to a myopic America. Further, he participated in the events he recorded in order to show a perspective that provides readers an insider's look at what happened rather than providing the historical recording of facts provided by those who merely observed events around them. His one-of-a-kind method shows how he stood apart from other journalists, even those who used unconventional techniques in reporting.

Thompson's place in the evolution of journalism can be established by exploring how Journalism has changed over time. Thompson's influence of his writing on modern reportage becomes evident in today's polarized media. *Fox News*, for example, is a right-leaning news network that often portrays stories in a way that coincides with its viewers' conservative viewpoint. In the same way readers read Thompson's work because they enjoy his wit and brashness, today's society often prefers reportage that leans toward their views and beliefs. Also, the satirical news outlets today are also reminiscent of Thompson's style. Comedic news shows like the *Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* use the news as a form of entertainment rather than for its informative value. Like Thompson, the "news" anchors on these shows are not restrained by objectivity or accuracy.

The impact of Thompson's work lies within the changing way the public decides how to receive its news. With the popularity of the Internet, people can look at whatever method they choose to receive their information. Most often, this information is filtered through the opinions and ideals of the writers. Thompson's

influence is exhibited in the public's choice to choose news sources that it believes to be more accurate because biases are evident, despite possible factual inaccuracies.

The New Journalism

The 1960s were a turbulent time in America compared to previous decades. The Civil Rights movement, the Cuban missile crisis, the struggle for women's rights, and the widespread popularity of the drug culture changed the way Americans thought of the world. Dr. Michael L. Johnson, author of *The New Journalism* (1971), wrote that the changes caused by the events of the 1960s were "so fast and profound, and their calling for moral attitudes and understanding so loud that conscientious journalism has metamorphosed itself in an attempt to be relevant and to participate communicatively in those changes" (xii). Some journalists considered traditional reporting methods inadequate for describing these events. These journalists sought to find a different way to report on events that reached a deeper truth than traditional reporting's formal approach to providing information. A new reporting style called "New Journalism" became an alternative way of recording the world changing events of the time period.

Unlike traditional journalism, New Journalism focused heavily on the audience appeal of the story rather than just the facts. These New Journalists provided the reader a connection to the story by including emotion, first-person narration, and fictional elements in their writing, whereas traditional journalism focused more on recording events without interpretation. The New Journalists strove to provide a means to see the world as it was at that point in history. According to Ronald Weber, editor of *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy* and author of several books on American writers, "The result was that by the late 60s the New Journalism had taken over as the New Realism,

examining the social world as novelists had once done but with the added attraction that it was all true, nothing made up” (45).

A major difference between the old journalists and the new was their relationship to their writing. As Nicolaus Mills wrote in his introduction to an anthology of New Journalism, the difference “is perhaps the most strikingly illustrated by the fact that when we think of the old journalism at its best, we generally think of newspapers, e.g. the *New York Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Christian Science Monitor*; but when we think of the New Journalism, it is generally the writers to come to mind first: Jimmy Breslin and Pete Hamill more than the *New York Post*, Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese more than *Esquire* magazine” (xv). The new form allowed journalists to reveal their personalities through their writing. It was not just about the written work, but also the reader’s relationship with the writer (Mills xv). Through New Journalism, readers were able to know the writer personally. Readers knew, for example, how Wolfe dressed and how Hunter Thompson felt about President Nixon. Identification with the writer allowed the reader to find his or her own way to judge the writing, rather than relying solely on the credibility of the publication in which the writing appeared.

Many writers defined New Journalism merely as a style that employed fictional devices. Coincidentally, many journalists of the time had entered the field with intentions of moving on to novel writing, following the path of literary greats like Ernest Hemingway and Stephen Crane who began their careers as reporters (Donaldson 528). However, as Scott Donaldson, biographer of writers like Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, pointed out, “it seemed that the cult of

objectivity had taken over everywhere, and the glamour had gone out of being a newsman” (528). As a result, journalists found a new outlet to foster their creative writing. New Journalism provided a conduit for this creativity by rejecting common journalism practices and allowing writers a myriad of liberties when transcribing events.

At first, the term “New Journalism” was almost exclusively associated with Tom Wolfe. In 1973, Wolfe helped edit a collection of essays in the style titled *The New Journalism*, which made him the unofficial spokesman for the developing genre. In Wolfe’s introduction to the essay collection, he wrote the old journalism style had taken on a “pale beige tone,” referencing the stylized method of reporting that most newspapers across the country had adopted. The common inverted pyramid structure¹ and exclusive attribution of facts to outside sources in most news stories provided writers with a formula that helped news organizations provide facts with little worry of inaccuracies.

To break away from common news writing, New Journalists employed techniques often used in writing fiction to guide the audience through the story—employing subjectivity where traditional journalism heavily relied on objective reporting. In his 1975 essay “Entrance” about the rise of New Journalism, Richard Kallan wrote, “One should initially realize that in its most encompassing sense, New Journalism is propelled by a dissatisfaction with traditional theory and practice of

¹ Christopher Scanlan’s *Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2002) provides information about the inverted pyramid and its usage.

reportorial objectivity” (8). It is noteworthy to say that most writers on the subject say that true objectivity cannot be reached anyway. Each writer perceives and writes about events as filtered through his or her bias and beliefs. While not the first to point out the issues concerning objectivity, the New Journalists were more zealous than their predecessors in articulating the problem. They questioned both the definition of objectivity and its desirability.

Instead of using traditional reporting techniques, New Journalists often employed “saturation reporting” (Kallan 12). This could include following a subject for several weeks or months to get inside the story, giving them the opportunity to record events from different perspectives. For example, Jimmy Breslin, a columnist whose work has been featured in various newspapers in New York City, is well known for immersing himself in the lives of his subjects—even living with them—to be able to record actual scenes and dialogue as they occurred in the subject’s life (Kallan 12). Saturation reporting and extensive interviewing allowed a more accurate and intimate portrayal of the setting, characters, and events. Traditional journalists observed from afar and remained detached in their writing. They usually did not provide additional details beyond what was necessary to tell the story and rarely used more than one interview as source material. These journalists often relied on secondary accounts to tell their stories without witnessing the action themselves. New Journalists, on the other hand, worked to create a personal connection to the subjects of their writing. Some writers, namely Hunter Thompson, took this one step further by not only recording events from an inside perspective, but also participating in the story so that he became a character in his own writing.

New Journalists found many problems with traditional journalism. Objective reporting presumed that every story has two sides, and two equally balanced views must be presented whenever possible. However, this assumes (perhaps erroneously) that every fact has only two sides and that the truth always lies between opposing viewpoints (Kallan 9). New Journalists argued that providing a balanced view didn't necessarily supply the truth. They incorporated the subjective emotions and inner thoughts of their characters with factual material to create a genre that allowed the reader to relate closely to the events, characters, and settings within the story. New Journalism interpreted events for the reader rather than balancing the writer's claims with those of an opposite viewpoint.

Moreover, New Journalists disagreed with the notion that all reporting should be impersonal and, thus, detached from the writer. This detachment supposedly kept the journalists' biases out of stories and allowed the reader to make his or her own assumptions about the validity of what was read (Kallan 9). Though the inverted pyramid allowed journalists to present the "facts" in an orderly and concise fashion, it did not leave room for emotion and details. The New Journalists, however, felt that this was the wrong way to approach a story. According to Kallan, "[They] maintain that such a policy—because it refrains from shading in the mood, tone, and feeling of a story—leads to sterile, meaningless, and often misleading journalism" (9).

Unlike traditional journalists, New Journalists were skeptical about the government's ability to provide trustworthy information (Kallan 9). During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States government had lost a lot of credibility. More

and more, the American people were discovering that there was a gap between what the government was telling them and actuality. Information concerning the mishandling of the Vietnam War and the Watergate political scandals showed the American people that the government did not always tell the whole truth.

New Journalists, in contrast, wrote for an audience that was mainly established out of the counterculture. “Question authority” was the major command of the 1960s counterculture, and as such, it makes sense that New Journalists rarely relied on just one source of information. No matter how many sources of information, these writers were often skeptical of even the most reliable sources (Kallan 9). However, these were not the only elements of traditional journalism that New Journalists rejected.

For example, traditional journalism methods involved using the inverted pyramid to provide factual accuracy and immediacy within the story. However, New Journalists sought to break away from this traditional formula to create a new way of reporting facts that focused more on the audience of the work. Inverted pyramid construction relied heavily on factual matter—the who, what, where, why, and how of the story—without utilizing literary devices to actively engage the reader. Mills explained:

...a who, what, where, when, why style of reporting could not begin to capture the anger of a black power movement or the euphoria of a Woodstock. At best it could give the external shape of such events, and even in this effort it did not possess the immediacy of television.

For an audience either deeply concerned or directly involved in the

changes going on in America, it was necessary to report events from the inside out, and this is what the new journalism attempted to do.

(xvii)

New Journalists included human emotion and everyday details in their writing to help the audience find a visceral connection with the story. Using elements often found in fiction writing, the New Journalists created a point-of-view that was not provided in traditional news writing.

To facilitate this new point-of-view, New Journalists like Norman Mailer² and Hunter Thompson³ often used personas to help narrate stories as they were unfolding. A persona provided journalists a mask to present a first-person point-of-view that was not that of the writer. However, some writers like Thompson and Wolfe also provided their perspectives in their writing, which allowed them to show the story through their eyes as a third party. New Journalists like Mailer often switched viewpoint in stories so that the reader could follow the events as they are unfolding through multiple personas rather than providing the events through just one character's point-of-view. New Journalists used characters' perspectives to provide subjective elements to the story with which the reader would likely identify.

Along with subjective point-of-view, Wolfe identified the three other main literary devices of New Journalism: 1) telling the story using scenes rather than historical narrative, 2) using full dialogue rather than mere quotations, and 3)

² Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night* (1968).

³ Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) and Dr. Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (1973).

recording everyday details (31). In scene-by-scene construction, the writer avoided using mere historical narration (Wolfe 31). Rather, using transitional material, he took the reader from scene to scene; the reader “traveled” with the main character through the story (Kallan 12). Whereas traditional reporting used quotations to help attribute facts to a source, New Journalists used dialogue and conversations in full to help provide a larger context for what was being said. The everyday details allowed the writer to establish the scene and to portray the eccentricities of the subject matter that often were not revealed in objective writing.

Objectivity had been a cornerstone of traditional reporting for a long time; but New Journalists placed their own views into the writing to help reach a greater understanding of the subject matter. However, despite using devices most often applied to fictional writing, Wolfe claimed that the New Journalists continued to adhere to factual accuracy by using the writer as the primary source of information. “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” (21). Wolfe added that the New Journalists used saturation reporting, extensive interviewing, and other methods to provide coverage well beyond that of traditional journalism.

In a 1966 interview with the *New York Times*, Truman Capote said, “It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the ‘nonfiction novel,’ as I thought of it ... Journalism is the most underestimated, the least explored of literary mediums” (Plimpton). In the 1960s, novel-length accounts of factual events that incorporated fictional elements evolved

into a new literary genre—the nonfiction novel. Wolfe argued in 1973 that “the most important literature being written in America today” was nonfiction rather than the novel (Wolfe xi). Collecting information utilizing the methods of both New Journalists and novelists, writers of the nonfiction novel provided a new form to readers that incorporated realistic emotions, settings, and characters that connected the reader to the story. Wolfe believed that realism was not another writing device, but rather it affected the emotions of readers in an unprecedented way. In his opinion, realism was an imperative element of writing. “My argument is that the genius of any writer—again, in fiction or in nonfiction—will be severely handicapped if he cannot master, or if he abandons, the techniques of realism” (Wolfe 34). The nonfiction novel maintained a sense of reality for readers despite creating a fiction to illustrate the truth.

With Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965) the nonfiction novel was born. Capote spent six years trying to capture the true account of the murders of four members of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas in 1959. He personally interviewed residents of Holcomb and created close relationships with some of them (Hollowell 32). He also established a relationship with the murderers, Richard “Dick” Hickock and Perry Smith. Using his own viewpoint as the source of most of the information throughout the book, Capote wrote his nonfiction novel in a style that allowed the reader to follow the story from the murders to the execution. Incorporating interviews, official documents, and his own observations, Capote’s story was unlike anything that had ever been seen before. Although Capote claimed that his work was “true” fact; in reality, he fictionalized quotes, created composite

characters, and even included an ending scene that never happened (Jensen). However, this has not stopped the work from being heralded by many as the first nonfiction novel and a unique work that was named as being one of the first pieces of New Journalism⁴.

Another writer who was considered one of the forerunners of the nonfiction novel was Norman Mailer. He said in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), the book that announced the new era of his literary career, “there is no way one can try to apprehend complex reality without a ‘fiction’” (199). This is clearly shown in his Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the March on the Pentagon in 1967. The novel was tagged “History as a Novel, The Novel as History” because it was written in two parts—one as a fictitious account and the other as an objective approach. Mailer split his well-known novel *The Armies of the Night* (1968) into two parts, an objective narrative and a personalized account. In Book I, “History as a Novel: The steps of the Pentagon,” Mailer modeled the persona, “Norman Mailer,” after himself to serve as a character for the reader to relate to and follow through the story. Norman Mailer’s character and Mailer as the narrator, both stop the action to enter sections of metafiction, providing an aside to the reader about the writer and the form of the writing, much in the style of writers like John Barth (Hellmann 39). In Book II, “The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon,” Mailer as the narrator tells the reader that he is handing over the story to the “historian,” which is a reference to that part of the novel being more objective. The second section is

⁴ John Hollowell’s *Fact & Fiction* (1977) gives a more in-depth view of the nonfiction novel and its writers.

written using a traditional third person perspective, and official documents are used to provide the source material. Mailer's unique form in writing *The Armies of the Night*, using both factual details and fictional elements, led him to be named also as one of forerunners of the nonfiction novel and New Journalism.

At the same time, writers across the country were embracing the techniques of the New Journalists, producing countless magazine articles and nonfiction novels that began to permeate traditional reporting and novel writing. For instance, during the inception of New Journalism and throughout its height of popularity, Gay Talese and Jimmy Breslin wrote magazine articles relying heavily on saturation reporting and scenes. Nine years before Capote introduced writers to the nonfiction novel, Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957) was a largely autobiographical work based on road trips that Kerouac took years before the book was published. Around the time *In Cold Blood* was published, Thompson spent 18 months riding with the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang in California to write his 1966 nonfiction novel, *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang* (Wolfe 27). The trend continued with other writers like Joan Didion, who inserted herself as a persona in her 1968 collection of essays titled *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, which chronicled the counterculture movement in California in the 1960s.

However, it was Tom Wolfe's entry into the realm of New Journalists in 1962 that brought the genre to the forefront of major American magazines. That year, after reading Gay Talese's essay on Joe Louis⁵ and becoming very interested in New

⁵ Gay Talese wrote "Joe Louis: The King as a Middle-aged Man" for *Esquire* in 1962.

Journalism, Wolfe was asked to write an article about custom cars in California for *Esquire* magazine (Kallan 10). With the deadline looming, Wolfe found that he could not write the article, so he just wrote a free-form stream-of-consciousness memorandum of what he had observed to the editor (Kallan 10-11). The editor removed the salutation and ran the memorandum as written. This became “The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby,” which was later published as a nonfiction novel in 1965. “In writing the ‘Kandy’ memorandum, Wolfe also discovered a new voice, a voice that would soon punctuate all of his journalism” (Kallan 11). He continued to write in his new informal style, publishing many nonfiction novels such as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), and soon he became considered the major spokesman for New Journalism (Kallan 11).

Many people argue that New Journalism wasn’t really “new,” but merely became more popular and widespread during the latter half of the 1960s. There were writers that used similar techniques to that of New Journalists long before the style was popularized. For example, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) was loosely based on the true story of the whale ship *Essex*, which was attacked by a sperm whale and sank. John Hersey wrote *Hiroshima* (1946) after interviewing several survivors right after the Hiroshima bombing. Using the information he gathered, Hersey reconstructed the event as it happened—a forerunner to the style of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* nearly two decades later (Johnson 47). Other works that used a mix of traditional reporting methods, saturation reporting, and fictional elements published prior to rise of New Journalism include Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1936) and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Additional well-

known writers who chose to write as both journalists and novelists (but not usually at the same time, though one style often affected the other) included Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and Mark Twain.

Writers write; it is only the form and style that change in popularity, according to George Hough III, author of *News Writing* (1975) and other journalism books. In a 1975 essay Hough wrote, “While I contend that this [change] is not revolutionary, but only evolutionary, it has resulted in a freedom of expression and style unknown to earlier stages of journalism. Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson couldn’t have surfaced in the 1880s, the 1920s, or even as late as the 1950s” (23). However, with the changing social attitudes of the time period, journalists like Wolfe and Thompson were able to write in their individualized styles without overwhelming reprisal from critics. While what New Journalists were doing wasn’t entirely unique, the loosening of what was accepted journalism and the heightened popularity of the new style allowed them to mimic and continue to alter the styles of earlier journalists and novelists.

Thompson’s writing style, Gonzo Journalism, was especially unique. Thompson incorporated the ideals of the counterculture and stylistic techniques of his fellow New Journalists in his writing, but he added his own twist—he had to be a part of the story. The drug-fueled fantasies he created changed reader’s perception, and his writing was a new approach to understanding the world after the counterculture’s ideals had faded out of mainstream society.

Gonzo Journalism

Thompson is often referred to as the “outlaw journalist” because he was considered by many to be unconventional in his lifestyle and his writing. He became an outlaw early in life, and his brushes with the law gave him a bad reputation in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. By 1955, Thompson was well known by the local police, having been suspected in several incidents of vandalism and having been arrested once for a gas station robbery and a second time for attempting to purchase alcohol underage (Wenner and Seymour 19-20). However, it was his third arrest in June 1955—just 11 days before his graduation—that changed the course of his life (Perry 19). Thompson and two friends were arrested after one of the other two boys mugged a man without Thompson’s knowledge. The two friends arrested with Thompson had well-to-do fathers who got them released from jail, but Thompson did not have those connections. Moreover, he had a bad reputation among those in the court system. In fact, a judge had threatened Thompson after his previous arrest that if he was arrested one more time, he would have to go to jail. He was finally given an ultimatum: jail or the military. He missed graduation from Louisville Male High School because he was in jail, and left immediately to join the United States Air Force when he was released.

Thompson began writing at an early age, but his professional writing career began in 1957 at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida (Gilmore). In boot camp, an aptitude test showed he had talent for electronics and he was assigned to train at electronics school (Perry 26). However, he had no interest in the subject and began to cause trouble in retaliation (Perry 24-25). Thompson did not like to be told what

to do. One night, he got drunk and threw a half of a bottle of gin into a guardhouse.

He was heading toward a dishonorable discharge when an opening became

available for a sports editor at the base newspaper, the *Command Courier*.

Thompson visited a library and after quickly learning some journalistic jargon, he managed to land his first journalism job as a sports writer for the newspaper (Perry 25-26). However, he did not stay out of trouble. Acting on a tip, he sneaked into headquarters and discovered that a soldier, Bart Starr, had been given a medical discharge so he could play professional football with the Green Bay Packers (Perry 27). Just before the *Courier* went to press, Thompson switched the front page picture with the medical discharge paper. The base commander was so upset about the story that he wanted to court martial him. However, the master sergeant who edited the *Courier* aided Thompson in receiving an honorable discharge from the service (Perry 28). As his final act in the military, Thompson wrote a story about a drunken riot at the base, detailing explosions and rapes, none of which actually happened, and filed it for the next day's release just as he was leaving the base (Gilmore 44).

After being discharged from the Air Force in the fall of 1957, Thompson moved around the country working for a number of smaller publications. His habit of getting into trouble followed him. He fled his first job, at the *Jersey Shore Times* in Pennsylvania, after only a few weeks, because he wrecked another writer's car and feared legal repercussions (Perry 29). From there, he headed to New York City where he got a job as a copy boy at *Time* magazine. John Clancy, a former roommate of Thompson's while he was living in New York, said, "Hunter used to tell us that he

was going to be a great writer—he'd mention Hemingway and Fitzgerald in the same sentence—but that he figured he'd have to do some sort of journalism to make a living in the meantime. He wasn't too happy about this, but he figured that if Hemingway did it, he could too" (qtd. in Wenner and Seymour 28). However, Thompson got fired from *Time* for getting into arguments with editors (Perry 36). He then found a job with the *Middletown Daily Record* in Middletown, New York, where he was fired two months later for allegedly insulting an advertiser and for kicking in a candy machine at the newspaper office (Thompson *Songs* 63-64).

After leaving the *Record*, Thompson moved into a mountain cabin where he wrote short stories. In 1959, he completed the first draft of *Prince Jellyfish*, a novel based on his life growing up in Kentucky. *Prince Jellyfish* has never been published, but an excerpt appears in Thompson's *Songs of the Doomed*. Soon after, he wrote for a short time for *El Sportivo*, an ill-fated Puerto Rican sports magazine, and later he worked as a Caribbean stringer for publications such as the *New York Herald Tribune* (Thompson *Songs* 65). Thompson also wrote his novel, *The Rum Diary*, in the 1960s; however, the novel was not published until 1998. He became a foreign correspondent in South America and later a roving reporter in the United States for *The National Observer* between 1962-1964. During his time in South America, Thompson began using illegal drugs regularly. His friends said he took amphetamines and a "variety of stimulants" while abroad (Perry 74). Thompson admitted to doing everything from "smoking 'the best grass in the world,' to chewing cocoa leaves, to eating peyote" while in South America (Perry 79).

When he wasn't working, Thompson read Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg—the writers of the “Beat” era whose works influenced writers of the 1960s (Gilmore 44). Mikal Gilmore, a longtime contributing editor to *Rolling Stone* magazine, wrote that Thompson “revered Kerouac above all—his work was all about freedom of the self in a convention-bound society” (44). This proved influential on Thompson's later works and in his everyday life. He once opened a bag of cement and shook its contents all over the patrons at a bar in New York—just to see what would happen. He was a non-conformist, embracing the counterculture rather than trying to comply with social norms. Until this time, Thompson had been a little-known writer. It was his research on the Hell's Angels that gave him a place among the New Journalists like Wolfe and Mailer. Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*, was so impressed with Thompson's coverage in South America that he wrote to him in December 1964 to ask him to write a story on the outlaw motorcycle gang (Weingarten 131). The Hell's Angels had gained national attention after California's attorney general, Thomas C. Lynch, polled various law enforcement agencies and compiled the data into a 15-page report titled “The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Clubs” (Weingarten 131). Thompson told a friend in 1966, “Writing for Carey McWilliams was an honor. So what if he doesn't pay much ... when my article appeared in *The Nation* it was like driving my stake in history” (*Hell's Angels* x). It was his unique style of writing in first person that immediately rocketed Thompson into New Journalism stardom.

Thompson's article “Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders,” published in *The Nation* on May 17, 1965, was so successful that Ballantine books offered

Thompson a contract to write a book on the Hell's Angels (*Hell's Angels* x). Using his advance on the book to buy a BSA 650 Lightning motorcycle, Thompson spent a year and a half riding with the motorcycle gang and befriending members including Sonny Barger, president of the Oakland chapter of the Hell's Angels, Terry the Tramp, Freewheelin' Frank, Tiny, and others (*Hell's Angels* x-xi). In his book, he wrote about the savagery of the gang and the public's perception of outlaw motorcyclists. He rode with the Angels, visiting their hangouts and attending their large-scale gatherings. It was not uncommon for members of the gang to stop by Thompson's residence. Thompson immersed himself so deeply in the outlaw gang that he "was no longer sure whether (he) was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them" (*Hell's Angels* xi). He felt like he was becoming friends with the Angels, drinking beer and riding motorcycles with the gang regularly. However, several Angels assaulted Thompson on Labor Day 1966 during a disagreement, essentially ending his relationship with the biker gang (*Hell's Angels* 264).

When *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* was published in 1967, it was an instant hit. While it was considered a work of New Journalism, it had unique characteristics that set it apart from other New Journalists. For example, Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* was published the next year, and in it, Wolfe used a third-person approach. Writers like Wolfe and Capote worked to separate themselves from the story by becoming an outside observer. In contrast, Thompson wrote *Hell's Angels* from a first person perspective by becoming a character in his story. He used himself as the primary source of information for the book while

including “scribbled notes, transcribed interviews, article excerpts, stream-of-consciousness, telegrams, and verbatim telephone conversations, that (set) him apart from the other New Journalists” (*Hell’s Angels* xii). The arrangement and usage of these elements showed that, while he might have shared similar techniques with the New Journalists, he was able to take these writing methods and make them his own.

While *Hell’s Angels* gave Thompson popularity as a New Journalist, it was his coverage of the Kentucky Derby in 1970 for *Scanlan’s Monthly* that set him apart from his contemporaries. Thompson didn’t see the horse race, but spent several days drinking and using drugs with illustrator Ralph Steadman¹ while observing the crowds of people who were in town to see the Derby. It did not matter that they had missed the race. To Thompson and Steadman, the crowd, not the Derby, was the real story. Juan Bruce-Novoa, a professor of Latin American and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Irvine, observed in his article “Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail” that the life-changing events occurring around the same time as the Derby (the Kent State killings, expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, and threats of Black Panther attacks) influenced the way Thompson wrote about the event. Bruce-Novoa explained, “To report it in the standard journalistic manner would have been to make his writing as myopic as the America of his despair” (40).

¹ Ralph Steadman is a British illustrator who has illustrated many classic books such as *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1967) and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1996). Steadman met Thompson while covering the Kentucky Derby in 1970. The two remained close friends until Thompson’s suicide on Feb. 20, 2005.

Therefore, he had to find a different way to convey what the Derby meant within the context of the world around him.

It was around that time period his habitual drug use and drinking had changed his writing. Previously, Thompson had been known to revise and rewrite an article until he thought it was perfect. His first wife, Sandy Thompson, recalled, “He could get out a page, maybe, or a paragraph, a really neat, wild paragraph—and then some gibberish. He couldn’t come out with a full piece” (qtd. in Wenner and Seymour 123). Thompson was under pressure because the deadline for the story was near, and he had not even seen the race. To appease the editors waiting for his story, he ripped pages out of his notebook and sent them. He assumed this would end his chances of landing another freelance job. To his surprise, *Scanlan’s* called and told him that it was a great story. “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” appeared in the June 1970 issue of *Scanlan’s Monthly* and was a hit with readers. Its freewheeling style coupled with Thompson’s acute observations and dark humor made it distinctive among Thompson’s works. With the Derby article, Thompson had stumbled onto an art unexplored by his fellow New Journalists.

Soon after the Kentucky Derby article was printed, Thompson’s friend, journalist Bill Coroso, coined the term “Gonzo” as a reference to Thompson’s writing. He wrote about the Kentucky Derby article, “Forget all this shit you’ve been writing. This is it; this is pure Gonzo. If this is a start, keep rolling” (Gilmore). Thompson was not convinced at first, but soon he began to embrace his newly found niche. His first wife said, “He could see that here was an avenue; people seemed to really like this, and they were going to pay him for it. He thought it was gibberish”

(qtd. in Wenner and Seymour 125). The American people, however, did not think it was gibberish. Gonzo was the answer to the fear and loathing Thompson and many other people felt concerning the radically dizzying changes of the time.

There are many definitions of and theories about the origin of the word “Gonzo,” but it was not widely used until it defined Thompson’s writing, so there was no concrete definition of the word before that time. The Oxford English Dictionary (2010) states the definition of “Gonzo” as, “of or relating to a type of committed, subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetorical style” and “bizarre, crazy; far-fetched.” Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary (2010) defines the word as “idiosyncratically subjective but engagé,” “bizarre,” and “freewheeling or unconventional, especially to the point of being outrageous.” All of these definitions were created as a result of Thompson’s writing, as both dictionaries trace the origin of the word to its usage in “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” (published in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1971). Peter Tamony, author of an article about the progression of the word “Gonzo” through American society, suggested Gonzo could be an Americanized version of the Spanish word “ganso,” meaning “gander; lazy, slovenly person, dunce” (75). Others have said the word comes from other roots, including an Italian translation meaning simpleton or fool, and the Portuguese definition of hinge or pin. However, none of these meanings appear to be a part of the origin of its American usage.²

² According to the online *Urban Dictionary*, Gonzo also refers to a style of video pornography made popular in the 1990s. The style is characterized by doing away with the storyline and featuring only intercourse throughout the video.

In an interview with Ron Rosenbaum in *High Times* magazine in 1977, Thompson recounted how he and Coroso covered the 1968 New Hampshire primary together, Coroso had used “Gonzo” to mean “crazy” or “off-the-wall” (Torrey and Simonson 47). Thompson lived and portrayed a lifestyle that was considered crazy by some. He openly used drugs like LSD and speed, and he drank massive quantities of Wild Turkey. In *Hell’s Angels*, he writes about driving on his motorcycle at 3 a.m., traveling 75 miles an hour with no helmet on Highway 1, a two-lane road precariously perched on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He also had an affinity for firearms—especially the Magnum Remington .44³—that he shot all hours of the day and night on his property in Woody Creek, Colorado. George McGovern, who ran for the presidential candidacy in 1972, said Thompson once went to a bar and ordered three margaritas and six beers all at once, just for himself (qtd. in *Gonzo*), and this appetite for being a rebel carried over from his everyday life into his writing. Forty years after Gonzo emerged, writers are still using the word, both in reference to Thompson’s writing and to Coroso’s idea that the word meant “crazy.” For instance, Chuck Klosterman wrote an article about the changing face of football. In it, he wrote, “Football coaches will try anything. They’re Gonzo.” In this usage, Klosterman meant that football coaches are able to move away from or adapt accepted plays in football and create new plays that often

³ In 2005, Thompson committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a .44 Magnum.

seem extreme because they are not commonly used⁴. However, most uses of the word “Gonzo” are still associated with Thompson.

One definition states that Gonzo was “Hunter’s famous style of extremely personal and super-subjective writing ... which entails conversation, quotes, sarcasm, humour, exaggeration and profanity” (Anleu, et. al. 31). While practitioners of New Journalism used many of the same literary techniques as Thompson, his journalistic style was distinctive from the styles of other writers. Wolfe and Mailer, for example, wrote in styles that were not considered conventional; both writers worked to keep themselves out of the story. Thompson, on the other hand, made the writer the center of the story. The writer or the writer’s persona provided information as filtered through himself, providing his personal opinion of the events taking place. Thompson wasn’t seeking objectivity, but rather chose events and details to interpret within the story. He also provided his own thoughts and ideas as he wrote, almost making it appear that those ideas were part of what was observed (Bruce-Novoa 41). In any event, writer participation was key to producing Gonzo Journalism. The writer infiltrated the scene, and participated and observed from within the events taking place (Green 108). Thompson did not just write about what he could observe on the surface, but

⁴ Klosterman uses the example of how defense strategies radically changed from the 1970s when most teams used a 3-4 defense. By the 1980s, common defense strategies changed because some coaches found different approaches to the sport that seemed radical at the time.

rather, he penetrated the story as a character to see what was happening behind the scenes.

To keep within the goal of the individualized reporting style without outside bias, Gonzo is supposed to be produced on-scene and made immediately publishable. According to Thompson, “the writer’s notes are published supposedly without editing” (Bruce-Novoa 41). The *Scanlon’s* article proved that this technique could work, and that people would read it despite the unique manner in which it was produced. The raw nature of the article appealed to the audience because it made the work seem authentic, without the polished transitions often provided in edited material. Thompson’s free-flow thoughts and observations can be seen in this example from *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*:

Total chaos, no way to see the race, not even the track...nobody cares. Big lines at the outdoor betting windows, then stand back to watch winning numbers flash on the big board, like a giant bingo game.

Old blacks arguing about bets; “Hold on there, I’ll handle this” (waving pint of whiskey, fistful of dollar bills); girl riding piggyback, T-shirt says, “Stolen from Fort Lauderdale Jail.” Thousands of teenagers, groups singing “Let the Sun Shine In,” ten soldiers guarding the American flag and a huge fat drunk wearing a blue football jersey (No. 80) reeling around with quart of beer in hand.

No booze sold out here, too dangerous...no bathrooms either. Muscle Beach...Woodstock...many cops with riot sticks, but no sign of

a riot. Far across the track the clubhouse looks like a postcard from the Kentucky Derby. (“Kentucky Derby”)

This passage shows how Thompson uses fractured sentences to portray the chaos of the Derby. The immediacy of the writing is clearly shown through the lack of transitional material. As traditional reportage and storytelling, the article would have been edited and adjusted after it was written. Because the article was not polished and perfected, its raw nature allowed readers to feel like they were experiencing the moment with the writer.

Also, it would be difficult to say exactly how a person would perceive a certain event, and editing would mean sacrificing some of the writer’s original thoughts for the sake of organization and transitional material. True Gonzo journalism is supposed to be written without editing; however, this is a requirement that was rarely met 100 percent. Thompson explained in the author’s note in *Campaign Trail* that the book was, “the bloody product of fifty-five consecutive hours of sleepless, foodless, high-speed editing” (1). However, Thompson’s account of the campaign trail was unique in that he wrote his book as the campaign progressed, rather than reflecting on the events and writing about them after the fact. Thompson admitted that *Las Vegas* was a “failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism” because it had not been written at the scene of the events as they occurred (*Las Vegas* 208). The events in the book actually took place before he sat down to write the book (*Las Vegas* 210). He “worked on it for more than six months, carefully crafting its craziness” while working on another story (Gilmore). The book was written in the same chaotic style of the Derby article even though he wrote on

the events after he was able to reflect on them. Despite this, the novel is celebrated as Thompson's most well-known piece of Gonzo Journalism, proving that Gonzo did not have to follow any rules, not even its own.

Thompson's style of journalism incorporated many techniques that are commonly found in fiction writing. Two techniques commonly found in Thompson's writing are *metafiction* and use of personas. Metafiction refers to the practice of the author commenting on the writing during the story. This technique is used in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. Metafiction is used throughout *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, which was an assembly of articles originally written by Thompson for *Rolling Stone* magazine. After each article appears in the book, Thompson writes about everything from past experiences to the difficulties with writing about politics to looming deadlines. These pieces often create a frame for the events Thompson wrote about or provided transition between articles. In *Campaign Trail* he wrote, "Sitting in front of my blank page at 2:30 a.m....I'll write about how it feels to be sitting in front of my blank page" (12). Many times in the book, Thompson reflected on his difficulties of writing about politics. Hellmann explains that metafictional sections like these are show that the book is, "a personal construct which shifts its drama from the events reported to the experience of those events by an individual consciousness" ("Campaign Trail" 19). In making his persona's writing the central fact of the story, Thompson can present the events on campaign trail as they happen with no clear objective order (Hellmann "Campaign Trail" 19). In establishing an

imaginative order for these events, the writer is able to use the persona to create the story around him self rather than the events that occurred.

Personas serve as a mask for the writer to hide behind. The persona is the character in the story, and helps provide a distinction between the writer and the main character. The necessity for this is due, in part, to Thompson's tendency to become involved in unconventional circumstances and outlandish pranks. For example, in *Campaign Trail*, the writer reflects on the writing of his "good friend and colleague of the Sports Desk, Raoul Duke" (33). While the reader knows that Duke and the writer are one and the same, making the separation in his writing allows Thompson to separate himself as a political reporter from the drugs and outlandish acts that he participated in as a character of *Las Vegas*. However, Gonzo was written with the writer as the focus of the piece, and Thompson was compelled to become his alter egos. Using these personas allowed Thompson to be both separated from and the focus of the story. Ironically, the narration of these personas were often, if not always, just as subjective as the writer.

Thompson's persona in *Campaign Trail* is Dr. Hunter Thompson. Thompson often referred to himself as a "doctor of journalism," which is the basis for the persona that gives it the perception of being a reliable source. However, this was not necessarily the case, as Dr. Thompson's narration was just as subjective as the writer's. Dr. Hunter Thompson is a fictional persona that participates in real life events. Thompson, the writer, used this persona to separate himself from these events, making the writing appear more objective. Dr. Thompson did many things, often for shock effect or entertainment, throughout the book. It is Dr. Thompson

who created havoc on Edmund Muskie's "Sunshine Special" whistle stop campaign in Florida by giving his press credentials to an inebriated man who later verbally attacked the candidate (Thompson *Campaign Trail* 88). This incident was so detrimental that Thompson was banned from the Muskie campaign. It is Dr. Thompson's point-of-view that narrated these events, and the writer reflected on the events after they occurred. The difference between Thompson as the author and Dr. Thompson as the persona is that the author usually emerges to tell the reader about the text, while the persona narrates and participates in the events within the story, as seen in this example from *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*:

The Mayor of Los Angeles has never bothered to explain the twisted reasoning behind his candidacy in New Hampshire, but every vote he gets there will come off Muskie's pile, not McGovern's. Which means that McGovern, already sitting on 20 to 25 percent of the vote, could zap Muskie's whole trip by picking up another 10 to 15 percent in a last-minute rush.

Muskie took a headcount in September and found himself leading with about 40 percent—but he will need at least 50 percent to look good for the fence-sitters in Florida, Muskie will have to beat back the show-biz charisma of John Lindsay on the Left, more or less, and also deal with Scoop Jackson, Hubert, Humphrey, and George Wallace on the Right.

Jesus. This gibberish could run on forever and even now I can see myself dealing into the old trap that plagues every writer who gets

sucked into this rotten business. You find yourself getting fascinated by the drifts and strange quirks of the game. Even now, before I've even finished this article, I can already feel the compulsion to start handicapping politics and primaries like it was all just another fat Sunday of pro football: Pick Pittsburgh by six points in the early game, get Dallas even with San Francisco later on...win one, lose one...then flip the dial and try to get ahead by conning somebody into taking Green Bay even against the Redskins. (37-38)

This passage exhibits how Dr. Thompson's character was bored with the factual details of the campaign. However, with his comparison of politics to football (the author's favorite sport), Thompson the writer shows that he had an interest in the inner workings of politics even though his character digressed from particular details of the campaign.

Another persona or character Thompson used was Raoul Duke, the main character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Duke was a pseudonym used by Thompson. Several of Thompson's *Rolling Stone* articles, including the original publication of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" are credited to Duke rather than Thompson. Like Dr. Thompson, Duke's character is based on the writer himself. The persona is a reporter who takes copious amounts of drugs. Duke also dresses like Thompson, wearing aviator sunglasses and using a cigarette holder⁵. Duke randomly erupts into dialogue, often yelling and startling the reader or the

⁵ While playing Duke's character in the movie adaptation of the book, actor Johnny Depp wore Thompson's clothes.

characters within the story with his paranoid and drug-induced hallucinations. As the Great Red Shark speeds down the desert highway on the first page of *Las Vegas*, Duke's narration goes from being calm, internal dialogue to screaming hysterically in just one paragraph.

I remember saying something like 'I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive....' And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about 100 miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming, 'Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?'

Then it was quiet again. (*Las Vegas* 1)

The voice that Duke hears screaming in this passage was his own. However, because of the drug-aided hallucinations, he heard the voice as though it was from an outside source rather than as his own internal dialogue. Duke isn't just a character in the story, but he is also an exaggerated representation of the author. Hellmann explains, "Thompson creates a self-caricature who is extremely disoriented, both by actual events and by paranoid illusions—usually induced by liquor or drugs—present in his own consciousness" (*Fables* 69). Essentially, Duke was another version of Thompson, an untamed force who surpasses traditional societal norms to reach a greater truth. Duke's exaggerated exploits—real or not—made him untouchable in the myopic America of the early 1970s.

Gilmore observes that Thompson and Duke are one and the same up to a point. "However, the fear and loathing Thompson was writing about—a dread of

both interior demons and the psychic landscape of the nation around him—wasn't merely his own; he was giving voice to the mind-set of a generation that held high ideals and was now crashing hard against the wall of American reality" (Gilmore). In this sense, Duke is the tool Thompson used, and Duke's thoughts and feelings are understood to be representative of the counterculture. Gilmore explains, "Thompson's fear and loathing was about disillusion—the feelings that gnawed at you after a dream that proved only an hallucination. It was about the terror of losing that illusion, and having no refuge."

For Thompson, the event he was supposed to be recording was not necessarily the focus of his writing. In *Las Vegas*, the story moves away from covering the Mint 500 and the district attorney's convention and is morphed into the search for the American Dream. In *Vegas*, "Thoughts and descriptions flow together, moving rapidly from one subject to another, direction often determined by word association. The free flow allows for constant digression, one of Thompson's central techniques" (Bruce-Novoa 41). The writer often moves away from the central topic of his writing to explain or discuss something related (or at times, seemingly unrelated) to the story. A scene in the Las Vegas airport is a perfect example of how Thompson digresses in his writing. "I felt very obvious. Amphetamine psychosis? Paranoid dementia?—What *is* it? My Argentine luggage? This crippled, loping walk that once made me a reject from the Naval ROTC?" (*Las Vegas* 199). Rather than returning to the point that he feels noticeable in the airport, Thompson continues to consider the length of his leg and how the Naval captain felt about it. Then he picks up a newspaper in the airport that contains a

bland story about the captain's death with few specific details. This is obviously a jab at newspapers at the time that took information as presented without digging deeper to find more details. "...Why bother with newspapers, if this is all they offer? Agnew was right. The press is a gang of cruel faggots," Duke muses (*Las Vegas* 200). In less than a page and a half, the writer manages to leave his paranoid musings to discuss issues with the length of his legs and the captain. He includes the article about the captain's death in full and then uses it to commentate on the apathetic disposition of the press corps. Thompson does not return to his feelings of paranoia in the airport until the next chapter. Digressions create a stream-of-consciousness that the reader perceives as immediate in the Vegas story, despite the book having been written months after the recorded events occurred.

Thompson also used dark humor in his writing. In one interview, he said, "...I think almost any kind of humor I like has a touch of melancholy or weirdness to it. I seem to be alone, for instance, in considering Joseph Conrad one of history's great humorists" (qtd. in Torrey and Simonson 44). In his writing, Thompson often portrayed human existence as ironic and pointless, and yet also comedic.

Now off the escalator and into the casino, big crowds still tight around the crap tables. Who *are* these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're *real*. And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a *lot* of them—still screaming around these desert-city tables a four-thirty in the morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the big

Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (*Las Vegas* 57)

This passage from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* demonstrates Thompson's view of the American people. It shows desperation, the mad hope of winning a nearly unattainable prize, as it is common knowledge that in most cases the House always wins. Thompson's imagery of these seemingly average people "humping" the American Dream is comical and the great irony of the scene is that, despite their continued efforts to win big in Vegas, most of the people Thompson is describing will go home empty handed or possibly in debt.

Thompson's work is controversial because of the inclusion of fictional elements and hyperbole. The fictional elements were used to enhance the story and make it more "real" for readers. By fictionalizing certain details and creating composite characters, Thompson was able to describe events in a way that was meaningful and relevant to his audience. As expected, this ran contrary to the journalism practices of the time, which focused on presenting an objective and unbiased perspective. New Journalists were known to enhance facts, embellish details, and add other fictional elements to their works, and Thompson was well known for incorporating these elements in his writing. Thompson wrote that Gonzo is, "a style of 'reporting' based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism ... 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" (*Las Vegas* 208). For Thompson, the end result

would be to tell the story without concern about bias and providing plenty of shock value, as was his character.

The use of parody and hyperbole in Gonzo Journalism led many critics to question the legitimacy of Thompson's interpretation of events and the journalistic value of his writing. However, while it is true that Thompson did incorporate fictional elements in his work, it does not make what he wrote any less true. As Hellmann explains, "The clear status of the work as a parodistic version of the events which make up its subject matter enables Thompson to distort the surfaces of conventional journalistic accounts into symbols of fictive truth" ("Campaign Trail" 17). Thompson routinely uses metaphor and other story-telling techniques to provide a truer account of what happened. "Storytelling, then, is made to function as reporting, a reporting that is certainly fable but not falsehood" (Hellmann "Campaign Trail" 21). However, Gonzo was a means to an ultimate truth continues to lead critics to disagree about the value of Thompson's writing.

Thompson's Influence on Modern Media and Literature

How can the value of Thompson's work be judged? Further, how can a critic measure his contribution to literature and, especially, to Journalism? Thompson's writing shows an evolutionary step in Journalism, using techniques rarely applied to Journalism while at the same time adapting older ideals and methods in his reportage. Looking at the history of Journalism, readers can see how it affected Thompson's writing and how Thompson brought about change in thinking about how reportage should be presented. 59

B.C.E. marks the first recorded use of Journalism, when Julius Caesar ordered the publication of the *acta diurna*, or daily public records. Since that time, journalism has survived as records, pamphlets, and broadsheets. However, it wasn't until the late 1600s when the word "journalist" came into use, and it wasn't until 1800s that the word "journalism" was used to describe what this new kind of writer did¹.

Throughout its history, journalism has been influenced by several factors². First, political and social groups who had ample resources, wealth, and power have been ones to use or control the media to their advantage. History has also shown the public's willingness to purchase one type of news and information over another. Likewise, those producing the news often determine what is reported based on the type of information the audience prefers to know about. For example, during the recent conflict in Iraq, News Corporation's media outlets have reported news in support of the war—a view taken by many conservatives. Rupert Murdoch, News Corporation's chairman, is a right-leaning

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* states the word "journalist" has been around since 1693, but "journalism" didn't come into use until 1833.

² See Ross Eaman's *Historical Dictionary of Journalism* (2009).

conservative. Although his newspapers and news channels take a conservative position toward the events they report, News Corp's *Fox News Channel* is the most watched news network in America. Furthermore, the idea of "the public interest" is an ever-evolving debate about what makes up journalism. In 1926, American philosopher and social theorist George Herbert Mead wrote,

The reporter is generally sent out to get a story, not the facts. Furthermore, newspapers are organs—organs of certain fairly defined groups. It is this realm of the reverie—of imagined enjoyable results—which dictates the policy of the daily press.

Whether this form of the enjoyed result has an aesthetic function or not depends upon whether the story of the news, after being thrown into this acceptable form, serves to interpret to the reader his experience as the shared experience of the community of which he feels himself to be a part.

(390)

Since Mead wrote this passage, mainstream media has continued to move toward and focus on objectivity in news reporting. New Journalists, even in the 1960s, were able to present "stories" rather than "facts" in their writing as Mead suggests. However, none of those writers interpreted the events they were recording quite like Thompson did with Gonzo Journalism. Thompson sought to find the story behind the facts and used his perspective to present the events he recorded. He was able to translate his experience onto the page for his readers, creating a story of aesthetic and interpretive value rather than merely recording the facts. Forty years before Thompson's breakthrough into journalism, Mead described exactly what Thompson did in his writing as a journalistic ideal.

Newspapers in the 16th and 17th centuries often interpreted accidents, weather, and other phenomena as acts of God. These reports provided a shared community view of the events, and did not necessarily present any evidence or a balanced view for their claims. In the 18th century, journalism changed as networks for sharing news improved. American colonial newspapers evolved greatly when, in 1758, Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter, Deputy Postmasters General, allowed printers to exchange copies of their newspapers without charge (Eaman 23-24). Coincidentally, the better quality of the reported news helped raise the readership of news reports. “By the 1820s, there were some 600 newspapers in the United States, more than in any other country in the world, while between 1790 and 1840, the percentage of households reading newspapers increased from between 10 and 20 percent in 1790 to close to 70 percent by 1840” (Eaman 25).

However, a shift in thinking came about in the 1800s as well. The 19th century brought the age of realism and the advent of the industrial revolution to the world, and these changes led the move toward objectivity. By the early 20th century, journalists and editors felt they needed to raise their standards by clearly identifying their sources and verifying their claims (Eaman 35). Cornell University was the first school to offer courses in journalism in 1875. By the 1890s, the inverted pyramid³ was used by most newspapers because it provided a format for clear communication (Eaman 31). Early articles were often published anonymously, but in the early 1900s, bylines started to appear with news stories. This was to make the reader aware of who was writing the articles, but it also gave

³ See page 6.

newspaper reporters notoriety for their work (Eaman 38). In 1904, the first full journalism program was established at the University of Illinois. With the rise of journalism in academia and the creation of professional organizations and codes of ethics, journalists continued to develop new standards for reporting the news.

While the concept of objectivity did not start with journalism, the pursuit toward objectivity in American news writing began with the field of science writing in the early 19th century. “By the 1820s and 1830s, wild speculation on one side and a fierce disregard for theory in favor of palpable facts by the majority of scientists on the other became defining features of American science” (Schiller 84). The study of history also affected the objectivity’s rise at this time, as “history was becoming a profoundly important means of validating the present, by dramatizing its organic and necessary connection to past events and past greatness” (Schiller 85). History was seen as an absolute truth, and thus there was a general consensus that it needed to be recorded without bias. Because newspapers, journals, and magazines were understood to be a preservation of history, it was inevitable that objectivity would become the ideal for journalists.

As a precursor to the objectivity movement, James Gordon Bennett said in the first edition of the *New York Herald* on May 6, 1835 that he intended to record facts, “stripped of verbiage and coloring” (Schiller 87). The traditional American ideology began to put an emphasis on objectivity in journalism, but not everyone was convinced it would become the cornerstone of American news writing. Henry Luce, founder of *Time* magazine, dismissed objectivity as a myth in the early 20th century, convinced that events needed explaining and deciphering (Ward 11). However, once journalism became accepted into academia, standards were set and objectivity became the ideal. By 1911, journalism

textbooks began including information about objectivity in regards to reporting (Mindich 116). Subjectivity in news writing would not return until the 1960s, when writers of creative non-fiction (Mailer, Capote, and others) wove subjective view points into their works, which soon after spawned New Journalism. The changing values of that decade allowed these writers to question the authority of journalism practices and ultimately led them to create their own. However, when the counterculture movement faded in the 1970s, objectivity still remained the model for accurate news reporting.

The Journalist's Creed, written in 1908 by Walter Williams, the first dean of the Missouri School of Journalism⁴, continues to be pivotable as a declaration of the values and principles for journalists the world over. The creed states, "I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism." However, this statement is not relevant to Thompson's work because he was not concerned with accuracy and fairness in his writing. For example, when Thompson wrote *Campaign Trail*, most of his articles showed George McGovern, Thompson's choice for the presidential candidacy, in a more favorable light compared to the other candidates. Thus, Thompson did not provide a fair representation of all the candidates because he favored his candidate above the others (*Gonzo*). However, the Missouri creed also states, "I believe that a journalist should write only what he holds in his heart to be true." Similarly, Thompson wrote what he felt was true by using his perspective to record events.

It is important to point out, however, that traditional definitions of journalism vary from how journalists view themselves. Journalists are defined as "one who earns his living

⁴ The University of Missouri-Columbia became the first university in the United States to offer a professional journalism school in 1908.

by editing or writing for a public journal or journals” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) or “a writer who aims at a mass audience” (*Merriam-Webster*). Journalists set standards for themselves well beyond these basic definitions to include accuracy and objectivity, but these features only define the journalists who choose to follow them. Dan Rather, a long-time television news anchor for CBS News, strove for accuracy in his reporting, and would not compromise his integrity as a journalist to sway a story in one direction or another because it was the current trend. “I’ve made my mistakes, but the one mistake I’ve tried hard not to make is to say, ‘Okay. I know which way the wind is blowing, and I’m gonna tailor my reporting to fit that.’ Ain’t gonna do that. Haven’t. Don’t. Won’t.” (qtd. in Leung). In a 1974 interview with *Playboy* magazine, Thompson said he never thought of himself as a reporter (Torrey and Simonson 21). However, as he often did, he contradicted himself. In an interview with *Spin* magazine in 1993, Thompson said, “As a journalist, I somehow managed to break all the rules and still succeed” (qtd. in Torrey and Simonson 104). Gonzo can be classified as journalism because it fits within the broadly defined parameters of what journalism can be. While he didn’t subscribe to the same standards that most journalists hold themselves to, Thompson’s work, still, supplied a version of the truth.

In retrospect, Thompson’s interpretations were often accurate. In 1966, Thompson portrayed the Hell’s Angels as being violent and dangerous. Just three years after *Hells Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* was published, the biker gang was implicated in violent altercations at the Altamont Free Concert in California. So too, the Las Vegas version of the American Dream that Thompson described in 1971 is the same now as it was then—the American Dream is still to get something for free. Today’s society is full of people who file frivolous lawsuits or participate in other scams to make get rich quick. Ironically, Las Vegas

(while becoming more of a family vacation destination) is still the city where the American Dream can be won or lost on the card tables. Moreover, Thompson's perception of U.S. President Richard Nixon was also proved to be accurate. Throughout his presidency, Thompson called Nixon "a crook" and "a liar." Nixon was re-elected in the 1972 presidential election by a landslide, but resigned two years later when it was revealed that his campaign was involved in the Watergate scandal. Tapes seized during the Watergate investigation revealed that Nixon had also delayed troops from returning from Vietnam before his re-election to portray his administration's "Vietnamization" in a favorable light⁵. His promise to resolve the conflict in Vietnam was a falsification of what was really happening. However, by maintaining the façade that the U.S. government's involvement was effective, he gained the trust of the American people and was elected president for a second term. The scandals surrounding the Nixon administration have become a part of our history, and history has shown Thompson's portrayal of Nixon to be accurate.

While *Las Vegas* is Thompson's most famous book, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* was Thompson's most important collection of reportage. When compared to another book about the campaign trail, *The Making of the President 1972* by Theodore H. White, Burdett A. Loomis, professor of political science at the University of Kansas, wrote, "White's description of a key vote at the Democratic convention pales beside that of Thompson, in terms of accuracy, wit, and detail; White may have the best sources at the top level, but Thompson seems to know and report more" (318). Thompson reported what he thought was important to his reader while other chroniclers (like White) of the

⁵ See Ken Hughes article, "Fatal Politics: Nixon's Political Timetable for Withdrawing from Vietnam" in *Diplomatic History* (2010).

campaign stuck to the facts and figures. Loomis explained, “*Fear and Loathing* provides both a better understanding of the absurd world of presidential campaigning and much more enjoyment than whatever an institutional insider like White can hope to produce” (319).

However, one critic of *Campaign Trail* said the book was not really about the campaign trail, but more about Thompson and his writing. Wayne Booth, writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, asserted in 1973, “The thesis of *Loathing* is that Hunter Thompson is interesting—or perhaps, to give him the benefit of the doubt, that McGovern could have won if he had followed Thompson’s natural, sincere, unfailing populist instincts” (8). In other words, according to Booth, the book wasn’t really about what it is supposed to be about. While Booth applauded White’s interpretation of the campaign trail for providing sources for his information, he also suggested that White’s account was devoid of the humor and entertainment value found in Thompson’s book. For example, in *Campaign Trail* Thompson wrote about an incident on Muskie’s “Sunshine Special” whistle stop tour in Florida. The night before Muskie advisors purposely left Thompson asleep to continue the tour without him, Thompson gave his press credentials to another man. The man, “Peter Sheridan,” boarded the train and drunkenly harassed many people. At the next stop, the man got off the train and continued to berate the candidate from the platform, causing Muskie to lash out at his heckler in front of his constituents. The following shows Thompson’s reaction as another reporter filled him in on what had occurred:

“Jesus!” I said. “Why didn’t they just put him off the train?”

“How? You don’t stop a chartered Amtrak train on a main line just because of a drunken passenger. What if Muskie had ordered an emergency

stop and we'd been rammed by a freight train? No presidential candidate would risk a thing like that."

I could see the headlines in every paper from Key West to Seattle:

Muskie Campaign Train Collision Kills 34;

Demo Candidate Blames "Crazy Journalist" (*Campaign Trail* 90)

Thompson's sarcasm toward this conversation was humorous. It is included to entertain the reader rather than simply provide historical narrative. However, Booth found that Thompson's self-imposed ignorance of politics causes his writing to be "melodrama, not history, and what he writes is not even as clear as drama" (9). Booth explained that Thompson's end goal was not to inform the reader or explain the game of politics, but rather to entertain (12). He concluded that *Campaign Trail* was, "an inflated footnote on how he used the campaign to achieve a 'very special kind of High,' an Entertainment for those who want to see politics as a silly game that could be dispensed with if only people-who-feel-right would get together. Cleverness, energy, and brashness cannot, finally, make up for ignorance and lack of critical training" (12). Thompson's work, in Booth's eyes, created a fiction that lacked any form of historical value as a viable description of the political events of 1972.

Critics of Gonzo, like Booth, often question Thompson's credibility as a writer and as a reliable witness. By definition, Gonzo required the writer's viewpoint and it allowed the writer to present his perspective to the reader without attempting to rerecord events like writers like Tom Wolfe. There was no expectation of objectivity in Gonzo journalism. Thompson once said, "the truth is usually a lot weirder than anything you can make up" (qtd. in Torrey and Simonson 47). Writers' search for truth began well before Thompson's

writing. American satirist Mark Twain has often been credited as a precursor of Thompson's writing, and their writing styles share similar qualities.⁶ Their quips about the social and political events of their respective time periods were entertaining, insightful, and often harsh. Twain wrote, "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't."⁷ Twain and many other writers thought truth could be powerful in literature. Similarly, Thompson's stories don't just tell what happened. Rather, Thompson looked beyond the events to record the greater meaning behind them, while also recreating the emotional ambience of moment.

In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, Thompson didn't record the events of the campaign, rather, he sought to break away from the pack journalism⁸ mentality and create interesting articles that included what occurred behind the scenes and off-the-record information that other journalists self-censored from their stories (Dunn 35). Tim Crouse, the other *Rolling Stone* reporter on the 1972 campaign trail, stated, "Hunter's pieces were a very particular hybrid of very clear minded, accurate, straight reportage and then sometimes flat-out fantasy. It was all run together and some people found it hard to tell the fantasy from the other stuff" (qtd. in *Gonzo*). Thompson's use of extreme

⁶ See Jeffrey Steinbrink's "Mark Twain and Hunter Thompson: Continuity and Change in American 'Outlaw Journalism'" published in *Studies in American Humor* in 1983.

⁷ Found in Twain's *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*. The quote is credited to *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar* within the text.

⁸ Tim Crouse said the pack mentality of journalists created an expectation that each of their stories and the information contained within much essentially be the same (Dunn 35). He attributes this to reporter's collective usage of official sources and previously acquired knowledge (Dunn 34).

exaggeration coupled with unverifiable details captured the essence of what occurred, but sometimes left doubt as to the truth of the events he claimed to be recording. Not everyone understood the difference between when Thompson was making a joke and when he was being serious. For example, major networks picked up an article Thompson wrote about candidate Edmund Muskie's supposed drug abuse on the campaign trail. Thompson wrote,

I immediately recognized The Ibogaine Effect—from Muskie's tearful breakdown on the flatbed truck in New Hampshire, the delusions and altered thinking that characterized his campaign in Florida, and finally the condition of "total rage" that gripped him in Wisconsin.

There was no doubt about it: The Man from Maine had turned to massive doses of Ibogaine as a last resort. The only remaining question was "when did he start?" But nobody could answer this one, and I was not able to press the candidate himself to answer because I was permanently barred from the Muskie campaign after that incident on the "Sunshine Special" in Florida... (*Campaign Trail* 134)

Thompson used this passage to make fun of Muskie's behavior toward the end of his campaign run. However, other news agencies picked up the story from *Rolling Stone* and published this information as fact. The information in the piece was not verifiable nor was it likely that a presidential candidate would put his campaign in jeopardy by taking illegal drugs. Thompson wrote that Muskie's drug use was a rumor, and later he admitted that he was the person who started the rumor (*Gonzo*). Because there was, in fact, a rumor, Thompson's reportage was truthful. Ironically, other networks picked up the story and published it as a truthful story, even without sources to back the assertion. "It occurred to

me about half way through the campaign that...that people actually believed the things I was writing about. Muskie eating this strange Brazilian drug,” Thompson said in a televised interview (qtd. in *Gonzo*). Another interviewer asked him to explain why he told everyone he made it up, and Thompson replied, “I had to. I couldn’t believe that people took this stuff seriously” (qtd. in *Gonzo*). To Thompson, the embellishment was a big joke. However, not everyone understood the punch line.

Despite the exaggeration and unverifiable information, Frank Mankiewicz, George McGovern’s campaign manager in 1972, said *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* was “the least factual, most accurate account of that campaign” (qtd. in *Gonzo*). Thompson captured the essence of the campaign in his writing, describing it in a way that the public could understand without exclusively sticking to the facts. He did not just report on the campaign trail, but he recorded what happened—the chaos and politics without the polished facts provided by speeches and campaign managers. “By the end of the campaign, Thompson was widely regarded as having written some of the most iconoclastic and effective political coverage that American journalism had ever produced” (Gilmore).

There is no doubt that Thompson has influenced modern media. Thompson’s particular brand of satire was a precursor to entertainment programs like *The Daily Show* (1996) and *The Colbert Report* (2005). These shows “report” the news using techniques similar the ones found in Thompson’s writing. Thompson’s personas created authority in his writing, and Stephen Colbert and *The Daily Show*’s Jon Stewart both present a certain persona—that of a news anchor—to give their viewers the impression they could be legitimate journalists. Their personas function as a derision of big media networks. Colbert and Stewart’s personas are similar to Thompson’s Raoul Duke in that they use

exaggeration, humor, and burlesque to explain their version of the events they cover. These personas, like Duke, provide a screen for the comedian to hide behind. Viewers are presented with a version of the truth through caricatures. Stewart and Colbert's ludicrously parodistic versions of events are also reminiscent of Thompson's writing. While irony, parody, and satire have been used throughout history, usually as forms of entertainment, it was Thompson's pasquinade that paved the way for modern satirical media.

People read Thompson's work because he provided an individualized outlook that was entertaining and selective. In the same way, satirical news programs present only the information that can be written into a comedy sketch⁹. The public wants to be entertained. Ward explained, "The market-driven demand for attention-grabbing news encourages entertainment disguised as news" (14). "News" shows like Stewart's and Colbert's blur the line between fact and fiction strictly for entertainment purposes¹⁰. Satirical newspapers like *The Onion* (1988), available in print and online, often use completely fabricated material, parody, and satire to create "news" that entertains rather than informs. There is no expectation of objectivity. As with Thompson's work, some people mistakenly interpret satirical news as objective reportage. For example, in 2002, the *Beijing Evening News* ran a story about the U.S. Congress threatening to leave the Capital Building and possibly relocating out of Washington, D.C. unless upgrades were made to the building. The writer

⁹ Stewart's program, for example, focuses mostly on U.S. foreign policy and politics, and it tends to ignore other major current events such as major national tragedies (Pew Research).

¹⁰ The hosts of these programs are comedians, not journalists. Interestingly enough, in 2007, Americans ranked Stewart as the fourth most-admired journalist, listed with media icons like Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Brian Williams, and Anderson Cooper (Pew Research).

had gotten the story from *The Onion*. The newspaper reported the story as objective news, even including a rendition of the new capital building (also from *The Onion*) with a retractable dome, without checking its legitimacy. This is a result of the Chinese media becoming more open and allowing the availability of more information, even wrongheadedly, often from “Internet-savvy, English-speaking writers who freely lift stuff from the Web and submit to editors who adopt a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ attitude toward the material’s origins” (Chu).

Furthermore, in light of Thompson’s influence, the current trend in journalism stems from the public’s demand for news catered toward their political, religious, or other beliefs. Modern conservative commentators like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh provide information as they see it on their respective programs. The information they afford is determined by the values and ideals of their intended audience. The rise of commentators who present the news based on their beliefs has created a polarized modern media. Fox News Channel currently provides news from the conservative point-of-view, as people who watch the *Fox News* program are aware of the leanings of their program provider. Ward observed, “It is an irony of history that Western society, which first regarded journalists as questionable writers-for-hire, has come to depend so heavily on the uneven standards of its newsmongers” (10). Coincidentally, Thompson’s reporting style was the harbinger of modern conservative news reporting. *Fox News* has reportedly manipulated certain aspects of the news to provide a conservative perspective, despite claiming to be “Fair and Balanced.” This has not stopped the public from obtaining its news from the program, as it is the most watched news program in America.

Thompson's writing also helped to relax the boundaries of modern journalism. Thompson, like journalists of the 19th century, was not a slave to objectivity. He was not the quiet observer, and his writing further expanded the creative liberties afforded non-fiction writing. Thompson provided a truth through his perception, and his techniques have been integrated in contemporary media with interesting results. Studies have shown that within the past decade, Americans have begun to doubt the legitimacy of journalists and their reporting (Maier).

The American Society of Newspaper Editors conducted a survey in 1999 that showed about 53 percent of Americans think the media is out of touch with mainstream society, and 78 percent believe reporters cater to their editor's interests instead of the readers' (Maier). However, the rise of blogs and satirical news outlets show the changing perception Americans have on what news they want to see or read. The Internet allows the public to be selective about the news they receive. The Internet brings the news to people's homes in the form of videos, news feeds, articles, and other media. People share information on blogs and in chat rooms. These "reporters" don't attempt to present a balanced story, but rather they share information from their point-of-view. Ward suggests this movement toward "public journalism" moves away from objectivity and presents the journalist "as a fair but engaged 'catalyst' of civic conversation" (14).

Mead predicted in 1926 that methods for receiving information would change as the media discovered its role in affecting the community it serves. He observed, "It does not necessarily lose its particular individuality, but it becomes functional in the greater society in a creative sense" (390). Today's focus on selective media and the turn toward more creative sources of information shows the public's interest in controlling the type of

information it receives. As Mead noted, intelligent news organizations may be able to lead their constituents in a specific direction. However, to continue to keep their audiences' attention, they must provide the news in the manner its readers and viewers demand.

The impact of Thompson's writing has also made contributions to literature. His style is reminiscent of writers like Twain, Josh Billings and James Thurber, and like these writers, Thompson provides humorous political and social commentary rather than straight reportage. Thompson also draws from the flamboyant writings of the Beat era. His prose often mirrors the chaotic, free form style of Jack Kerouac and the wit of William Burroughs. Like these writers, his writing often works as a forceful social commentary that pulled the reader into the moment. In this example from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson laments the demise of the counterculture:

There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda...You could strike sparks anywhere. There was fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning...

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

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the

high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back” (67-68).

The tone of this passage demonstrates how Thompson crafted his easy-going style to mimic the effervescent mentality of the Love generation he was describing. Thompson’s writing spoke to his readers, who had similarly been affected by the changes in society after the end of the Hippie movement. Readers today continue to enjoy Thompson’s writing because, like Twain, Kerouac, and others, his writing not only records events, it portrays the disposition of a particular group of people during a distinctive period in history.

There have only been a few writers who have adopted Gonzo style into their writing. For example, Oscar Zeta Acosta, Thompson’s friend and the basis for the Dr. Gonzo character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, is considered a Gonzo writer. *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), Acosta’s first book, was written as an autobiography, but it included fictionalized material. Bruce-Novoa explained that like Thompson, “Acosta’s books are also hybrids of fiction, journalism, and autobiography. Though different from Thompson in many ways, Acosta is a Gonzo writer and character. The first chapters of *Brown Buffalo* seem to be straight Gonzo style; the reader is thrust into Thompson’s chaotic society” (44). Tim Cahill is also considered a Gonzo writer; he is a travel journalist who uses digression and stream of consciousness to write about his adventures around the world. He is an ordinary man who does extraordinary things, and his wild misadventures are part of the joke in his book titles including *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh* (1987) and *A Wolverine Is Eating My Leg* (1989).

Although there aren't many people who write like Thompson, his writing still appeals to readers today. He is a cult icon because of his writing and his nonconformity. Thompson continues to reach today's readers through the documentaries and other recent works that chronicle his life and writing. His legend as a hero of the counterculture is kept alive by his friends, namely Johnny Depp, who will star in the upcoming movie adaptation of Thompson's *The Rum Diary* (2010). Thompson's penchant for the absurd continues to be entertaining, and his unconventional style appeals to today's readers. His writing was strongly worded, and he wrote without limit or control. As Gilmore lamented after Thompson's suicide, "There aren't many around these days who are willing to tell us the hard stuff, and just about none who are willing to name swine as swine." Whereas traditional media uses restraint as a method to protect itself, Thompson wrote exactly how he viewed things without care of the reprisals. While combining entertaining antics and insightful analysis, his writing challenged the distinction between non-fiction and fiction writing. His reportage examined in-depth the American character which continues to be called into question today.

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