

# Gonzo Journalism and the Work of Hunter S. Thompson as Literature

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature –Teaching English as a Foreign Language and German Language and Literature –Teaching German as a Foreign Language

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Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes and presents the gonzo journalism of American author and journalist Hunter S. Thompson as literature. Gonzo journalism is a hyper-subjective type of journalistic investigation where the reporter becomes the center of the story and even provokes certain events. Thompson popularized the term and his intense journalistic style is remembered for its inability to compromise with the average reader and editor while commenting on and criticizing the dominant American ideology, whether the topic is politics or the state of society in general. Thompson is also remembered as a writer because of his support for the use of alcohol, narcotics and profanity while acting as a professional journalist. His life is full of examples of opposing authority, be it as a child when he lied to an FBI Agent or as an adult with his use of illegal drugs. The gonzo texts contain social commentary, aesthetics and a careful use of language not ordinary in journalism. Thompson is a peculiar example of a writer in the history of American literature and journalism and his specific style of writing and method of gonzo journalism contributed to the development of hyper-subjective type of literature and the bridging of the gap between journalism and literature.

**Keywords:** Hunter S. Thompson, journalism, gonzo, literature, drugs, hyper-subjectivity.

## Introduction

Hunter S. Thompson is known as a controversial writer and one of the most important reporters of the 1960s. On the one hand, he has been praised for his genius and specific brand of journalism. On the other, he has been loathed for his nonconformist behavior and outlaw style of writing that has frequently resulted in neglect and exclusion from a deserving place in American literature. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that the work of Hunter S. Thompson and his gonzo style of journalism belong to literature. The first part portrays Thompson's key characteristics and events that formed him as a person and writer, followed by depictions of his life situations that revolve around the works "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. The paper continues with the section on literary theory that presents the definitions, hallmarks, brief history, and theory of new journalism ending with Thompson's gonzo method of journalism for which we will argue that it belongs to literature as well. The third part focuses on literary theory with the intention to provide a framework of what defines literary writing as a creative art form in contrast to what is considered traditional, which will allow us to analyze Thompson's above mentioned works in such a way as to prove that these works definitely carry literary merit and are to be considered as serious artistic texts and not just a purely journalistic expression through a creative art form.

The primary sources used in this thesis, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* are all works by Thompson. The secondary sources which will provide further information for our arguments are: *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom – Interview with Hunter S. Thompson*, by Anita Thompson, *What is Literature? A Definition Based on Prototypes* by Jim Meyer, *The Feature Game* by Tom Wolfe, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* by John Hellman, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* by Terry Eagleton, *The Gonzo Text – The Literary Journalism of Hunter Thompson*, *Hunter S. Thompson and gonzo journalism as literature* by Michael P. Kiernan, *What is Gonzo? The etymology of an urban legend* by Dr. Martin Hirst and *Edward Muskie's Drug Addiction According to Hunter Thompson*.

As a person with a criminal history and a frequent and devastating drug and alcohol habit, Thompson remained for most of his life on the fringe of society as an outsider. This allowed him



to become an observer of the people who had failed to achieve the American Dream, Thompson's central theme which he, for the most part, considered dead. To portray the death of the American Dream, Thompson spends his time with the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels, intoxicates himself with the decadent crowd of the Kentucky Derby, ventures into to the Heart of the American Dream, namely Las Vegas, and finally, focuses on the political game which puppeteers the illusion of the American Dream. What better way to start tracking the rotten trail of the American Dream than by immersing himself with the decadent crowd of the Kentucky Derby which was considered to be one of the lowest layers of society, but still carried a false sense of pride. After that, he continues his investigation downward toward the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels, a vicious and violent group whom technology and society has failed, so they decided to live on the outskirts of their society in a tribal manner and engage in biking, consumption of drugs and alcohol, and violence, basically creating their own culture. The peak of tracking the American Dream is Thompson's plunge into the heart of the American Dream: Las Vegas. There he finally meets with the eyes of the beast that the American people have been feeding for so long and comments on the failed movement of the counterculture of the 1960s hippies, which tried to defeat the lie that was the American Dream. Finally, his journey ends with his political commentary on the puppeteers of the American Dream in his book *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, which raised his status to an accepted political commentator. However, for the most part, Thompson was neither accepted as a serious writer nor deemed worthy of any literary merit, and his writings were misunderstood and underappreciated.

## 1. A Brief Introduction to the Man Who Created Gonzo

The raw, uncompromising energy against any kind of authority, which is present in Thompson's work, can be traced all the way back to his early life. He was born in 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1942, when he was six years old, his family settled in the Highlands. One of the most important events which shaped him as an individual might be the lie he told to an FBI agent when he was only nine years old. Even though he had committed a felony by destroying a mailbox, he denied the accusation:

The Doctor's new book, *Kingdom of Fear*, comes as the author's autobiographical pummeling of the senses that dates back to his childhood when, at 9 years old, the FBI grilled him for destroying a mailbox and he called their bluff. "And I learned a powerful lesson," writes Thompson. "Never believe the first thing an FBI agent tells you about anything—especially if he seems to believe you are guilty of a crime. Maybe he has no evidence." (Thompson and Hitchens 339)

Even though Thompson will always be remembered for his outlaw manners and rebellious attitude, this type of behavior was not simply an outburst of a delinquent personality, but it carried an idea to protect or serve the people Hunter cared for the most. During his childhood and youth he wrote for his friends and family, and during his prosperous career as a journalist, he wrote for the American nation. His acts carried a message:

**Russert: At the age of nine, that little devil became involved with the federal agents because you were toppling federal mailboxes. True?**

**HST:** True. Well, it was only one box that I was accused of.

**Russert: One?**

**HST:** Yeah.

**Russert: And what did you do?**

**HST:** We did drop it, yes, in front of a speeding bus, yeah, call it a speeding city bus, to defend the honor of the neighborhood because the bus driver was rude and impatient. He wouldn't wait for us while we ran down the hill trying to catch the school bus. We were just kids.

**Russert: Was that a defining moment in your life?**

**HST:** Well, it wasn't until the FBI came after me and wanted to put me in prison.

**Russert: At age nine.**

**HST:** Yes, my mother cried. Yes, it carried a mandatory five years in prison for defacing federal property. Yeah, that's when I learned that they just—they were fishing, and they didn't know that I did it. I'm very concerned and every part of my constant thinking has to do with the Fourth Amendment. I've talked—you know, started the Fourth Amendment Foundation to—although the Fourth Amendment is just about shredded now. There has to be some defense against handing this government in vain, seize, take over, invade our lives and our personal, well, privacy in that—every day. (Thompson and Hitchens 331)

However, Thompson tried being a good and respectable student when he attended elementary school and high school and worked in literary clubs, but he was soon thrown out of the Athenaeum Literary Association, a school-sponsored literary and social club because he was sentenced to 60 days for being in the car with a robber. He then pushed his career forward into the military profession, however, this did not work out for him as he was insubordinate and was kicked out. This pattern will continue throughout his career as a journalist because he was always rebelling against any kind of authority; however, this rebellious pattern will finally end as he rises to fame and his behavior becomes the new norm.

**Rentilly: You write a lot of about your juvenile delinquent childhood, about pushing a Federal mailbox into the path of an oncoming school bus and other sundry peccadilloes from your youth. In the new book, you write: "I was cursed with a dark sense of humor that made many adults afraid of me, for reasons they couldn't quite put their fingers on."**

**HST:** Yep.

**Rentilly: How do you think that's informed your writing, being a rotten kid?**

**HST:** Oh, I think it's a pretty strong factor. Gave me a kind of, I don't know, an anti-authoritarian kind of position. Which I think has worked out pretty well for me.

**Rentilly: Anti-authority? Yeah, that seems to have panned out for you.**

**HST:** Yeah. I've done all right, considering you can get put up against the wall and executed at any minute in this country for so much less than I've done in my lifetime. (Thompson and Hitchens 325)

## 1.1 Hunter S. Thompson's Life around Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

First of all, the book *Hell's Angels* began in 1965 as an article “The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders” for which Thompson was offered book deals from several publishers. He spent the next year in Oakland and San Francisco writing his book. Right off the bat he revealed to the Hell's Angels that he was a journalist and that he was writing a story about them. Birney Jarvis, a former member of the gang and a reporter introduced Thompson to the gang, which allowed him to get close to them in a way other people and especially reporters were not able to. The Hell's Angels did not only trust him, but they helped him with his journaling. They listened to the tape recordings of their conversations and helped him keep all the facts true and accurate. The gang even paid visits to his house.

Tom Wolfe once described Hunter as having been “embedded” with the Angels, and, anachronistic though the term is in (or out of) context, it can't be bettered as a summary of how committed he was to living the story, to being part of it and changing it by the way he wrote it. Which is ultimately what “Gonzo” means. (Thompson and Hitchens xv)

What made this report so different from the other attempts of journalists to investigate and research the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang was that Thompson was the first ever journalist to actually join the motorcycle club, even though he immediately admitted to the biker gang that he was a reporter. This allowed him not only to report on the story, but also take part in it and change it from the inside.

Unfortunately, Thompson's relationship with the Hell's Angels ended rather violently, when he was beaten up by several members of the gang.

On Labor Day 1966, I pushed my luck a little too far and got badly stomped by four or five Angels who seemed to feel I was taking advantage of them. A minor disagreement suddenly became very serious. None of those who did me were among the group I considered my friends -- but they were Angels, and that was enough to cause many of the others to participate after one of the brethren teed off on me. The first blow was launched with no hint of warning and I thought for a moment that it was just one of those drunken accidents that a man has to live with in this league. But within seconds I was clubbed from behind by the Angel I'd been talking to just a moment earlier. Then I was swarmed in a general flail. As I went down I caught a glimpse of Tiny, standing on the rim of the action. His was the only

familiar face I could see. . . and if there is any one person a non-Angel does not want to see among his attackers, that person is Tiny. I yelled to him for help -- but more out of desperation than hope. (Thompson 148)

The book *Hell's Angels* made Thompson famous as a journalist as he was the first ever reporter to infiltrate the motorcycle gang and subsequently got them to come as guests on various televised talk shows where they talked about their life in the gang of bikers. He managed to destigmatize the motorcycle gang in the eye of the public by showing to the viewers and readers that these people were as human as the average working man. The book is also noteworthy for its peculiar writing style and shows the first stages of the development of the soon-to-be famous gonzo style.

## 1.2 Hunter S. Thompson's Lucky Break with the Article "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved"

"The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" was the first ever concrete example of gonzo. It came to be in a completely spontaneous manner in 1969 when Thompson was working for *Scanlan's* magazine. While he was having dinner in Aspen with the novelist Jim Salter, the novelist advised him to write a piece on the Kentucky Derby. After Thompson called Hinckle, his editor, they agreed on the details of his new assignment. However, there was one minor adjustment that Thompson insisted on:

By that time I'd learned to hate photographers; I still do. I can't stand to work with them. So I said we've got to get an illustrator for this, and I had Pat Oliphant in mind. Hinckle said fine, you know, do it. In an hour's time the whole thing was settled. Oliphant wasn't available, but Ralph Steadman was coming over on his first trip to the U.S. and it was all set up that I would go to Louisville and do the advance work, and Ralph would meet me there later. (Thompson and Hitchens 89)

By declining to have any photographers present with him, Thompson agreed to the illustrator Ralph Steadman, who would prove to be worthy of his company as they both had an appetite for drugs, alcohol and causing riots. This collaboration in which these two deranged men supported each other allowed for the creation of gonzo. Further collaboration flourished into a life-long alliance between the writer of gonzo and the illustrator of gonzo.

When Thompson and Steadman arrived at the derby, they found that they would not be let in,

as the tickets to the derby were sold out months before. In order to get in, they lied that *Scanlan's* magazine was a world-famous Irish newspaper that hired them to do artistic illustrations about the Kentucky Derby. This worked and they were allowed to enter, although both were intoxicated, into the press box above the governor.

In any case, we got total access to everything, including a heavy can of Mace . . . Now this is bad, this is ugly. The press box is on the roof, directly over the governor's box. And I had this can of Mace, I'm not sure why . . . maybe for arguments; Mace is a very efficient way of ending arguments. So I'd been fondling the can in my pocket, but we couldn't find any use for it—nobody threatened me. I was kind of restless. Then just before the Derby started we were standing in the front row of the press box, up on the roof, and just for the hell of it I blasted the thing about three times about 100 feet straight down to the governor's box. Then I grabbed Ralph and said let's get out of here. Nobody Maces the governor in the press box. It's not done. It's out of the question. I have no idea what the hell went on in the box when the stuff hit because we took off. That was the end of the story. (Thompson and Hitchens 90)

Two days later, while most of the magazine was already out, Steadman had finished his illustrations, but Thompson had not written a word about the event except for the notes he had in his notebook. As the pressure was rising and he was suffering writer's block, the famous writer tried in a last ditch effort to simply send his scribbled notes to the magazine. And it worked – the magazine was amazed by his writing and they decided to print everything exactly as he had written it.

They printed it word for word, even with the pauses, thoughts, and jagged stuff like that. And I felt nice that I hadn't sunk the magazine by failing to get the story done right, and I slunk back to Colorado and said oh fuck, when it comes out I'm going to take a tremendous beating from a lot of people. But exactly the opposite happened. Just as soon as the thing came out, I started getting calls and letters. People were calling it a tremendous breakthrough in journalism, a stroke of genius. And I thought, what in the shit? (Thompson and Hitchens 91)

Though it was not known at that time, this article was the first ever article of gonzo journalism. The article itself was not about the race, but about what Thompson and Steadman had access to: the decadency of the of the derby and its crowd. Even though the article was considered a breakthrough in journalism, as this was the first instance of hyper-subjectivity in journalism and they provoked for the whole fiasco to occur at the race they were supposed to cover. In the end

they did not cover the race as was ordered, but they covered the drug-filled event that they themselves created. The article was not famous; however, it was praised by other professionals in the field such as Bill Cardoso, who coined the term “gonzo journalism.”

### 1.3 Hunter S. Thompson's Mainstream Success with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and the Tangled Mania Behind the Book

The book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* was not planned to be a huge book project at all, but it started as a combination of a piece of exposé Thompson was writing for *Rolling Stone* magazine and an assignment about a 250 word photo caption assignment for *Sports Illustrated*, which grew into a feature story for *Rolling Stone* magazine. The 300-hundred pound Samoan who Thompson or Raoul calls his lawyer Dr. Gonzo in the novel was actually the attorney and Chicano activist Oscar Zeta Acosta. Thompson’s assignment was to write about the killing of Rubén Salazar, who was killed during a protest against the war in Vietnam. The attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta was to help him with his assignment, but found it difficult to cooperate in Los Angeles, so Thompson and Acosta took up an offer from *Sports Illustrated* to write an article about the Mint 400 race in the desert of Las Vegas.

**HST:** Right after Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises*, he wrote a very small book, not much noticed. And I remember reading that he said, “I wrote that just to cool out after *The Sun Also Rises*.” I was working on Salazar, an ugly murder story. You know how you get. You get that, “Fuck, damn, where shall we go now?” You know, “Whose throat can I eat?” And when I got stuck out in that Holiday Inn near the Santa Anita racetrack, outside Pasadena [Calif.], I was there to work on this murder story. That was work, boy, that was blood. And, boy, that role got very, very, tough. That’s why I went to Las Vegas. And when I came back from Las Vegas, I was still writing that story. (Thompson and Hitchens 208)

The texts which Thompson wrote during his first visit to Las Vegas with Acosta were sent to *Sports Illustrated* and were rejected. After that, he sent the same writing to *Rolling Stone* magazine and the magazine encouraged him to keep on writing by appointing him to report in Las Vegas on the National District Attorneys Association's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. Thompson, again, brought with him to Vegas his friend and attorney Acosta, on the premise that he needed more research for his writing, i.e. he needed a partner in his crime of investigating the case of the American Dream in Las Vegas while out of his mind on drugs and alcohol.

**HST:** Yeah, this was a breakthrough. So I called Oscar, and I said, “Hey, are you ready to go? We have another date in Las Vegas.” He resisted at first, but he couldn’t resist me. And this time he flew in, and I flew in. Our cover was absolutely essential. I had registered for the conference, sent in a check—it was \$125 apiece—talked to Jann [Wenner]. I had told Oscar, “Don’t tell anyone we’re going to penetrate the deepest bowels of the enemy. This is not funny. (Thompson and Hitchens 207)

When the book was published, it did not receive positive reviews because of its scattered, unclear plot and controversial material such as profanity, use of drugs, and violence. However, as the popularity of the book grew, positive reviews started coming in. The book was acknowledged for its style with a quality and beautiful combination of prose poetry and journalism. However, although his book quickly rose to fame and was later even adapted to a movie of the same title, Thompson’s dissatisfaction with it is evident: “This is getting pretty heavy. . . so I should cut back and explain, at this point, that *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* is a failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism. My idea was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, as it happened, then send in the notebook for publication -- without editing" (Thompson 69).

#### 1.4 When Gonzo Meets the Dubious Reality of Politics, Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trails '72

Thompson's last great work *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trails '72* was created out of articles he wrote on the 1972 presidential campaign. Whereas the works mentioned in the previous sections could be mostly described as a “paranormal” approach to reality, this book, which followed the presidential campaign and for the most part focused almost completely on the Democratic Party's primaries, tried to provoke with ludicrous fabrications the political situation that was unfolding in front of his eyes. Little did he know, that in the dubious reality of the political world, the public, which on average is usually not well informed, would deem possible his provocative fabrications.

**Playboy:** Well, you certainly say some outrageous things in your book on the 1972 Presidential campaign; for instance, that Edmund Muskie was taking Ibogaine, an exotic form of South American speed or psychedelic, or both. That wasn’t true, was it?

**HST:** Not that I know of, but if you read what I wrote carefully, I didn’t say he was taking it. I said there was a rumor around his headquarters in Milwaukee that a famous Brazilian



doctor had flown in with an emergency packet of Ibogaine for him. Who would believe that shit?

**Playboy: A lot of people did believe it.**

**HST:** Obviously, but I didn't realize that until about halfway through the campaign—and it horrified me. Even some of the reporters who'd been covering Muskie for three or four months took it seriously. That's because they don't know anything about drugs. Jesus, nobody running for President would dare touch a thing like Ibogaine. Maybe I would, but no normal politician. It would turn his brains to jelly. He'd have to be locked up.

**Playboy: You also said that John Chancellor\* took heavy hits of black acid.**

**HST:** Hell, that was such an obvious heavy-handed joke that I still can't understand how anybody in his right mind could have taken it seriously. I'd infiltrated a Nixon youth rally at the Republican Convention and I thought I'd have a little fun with them by telling all the grisly details of the time that John Chancellor tried to kill me by putting acid in my drink. I also wrote that if I'd had more time, I would have told these poor yo-yos the story about Walter Cronkite† and his white-slavery racket with Vietnamese orphan girls—importing them through a ranch in Quebec and then selling them into brothels up and down the East Coast . . . which is true, of course; *Collier's* magazine has a big story on it this month, with plenty of photos to prove it . . . What? You don't believe that? Why not? All those other waterheads did.

Christ, writing about politics would paralyze my brain if I couldn't have a slash of weird humor now and then. And, actually, I'm pretty careful about that sort of thing. If I weren't, I would have been sued long ago. It's one of the hazards of Gonzo Journalism. (Thompson and Hitchens 46-47)

## 2. A Brief Story on New Journalism

New Journalism developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the US as a new style of writing news, which is a specific style of journalistic writing where the journalist in his writing chooses *truth* over *facts*. In its form and manner of addressing the issue at hand it reads and writes like a novel.

And yet in the early 1960s a curious new notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature statusphere. It was in the nature of discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would... read like a novel. *Like* a novel, if you get the picture. This was the sincerest form of homage to The Novel and to those greats, the novelists, of course. Not even the journalist who pioneered in this direction doubted for a moment that the novelist was the reigning literary artist, now and forever. All they were asking for was the privilege of dressing up like him. . . (Wolfe 9)

The content in this new journalistic style is presented as fiction. The beginning of this new journalistic movement has been attributed to Tom Wolfe, a prolific American author and journalist. His first work, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, published in 1965 was considered as a form of new journalism. However, *In Cold Blood*, a nonfiction novel by American writer Truman Capote, was also published in 1965, and deemed by its author as a work of the new literary genre. Thus, we can conclude that this novelty in journalistic writing has two different sources.

The term “new journalism” that became associated with Wolfe’s work, and the term “nonfiction novel” used by Capote, in themselves stimulated a controversy that was often more fierce than perceptive; still, it contributed to recognition of the form as a vital new force in contemporary American society. While the two terms may be used to describe the same works, they indicate the separate origins of this form of writing. (Hellman 1)

The important question is: since the advances in technology and, as a result, the flourishing of the media, why was there a need for a new type of journalism at all? Truman Capote's breakthrough was not conceived as an effort to create a new form of journalism. His attempt was one of a literary theorist and of an established writer, who wanted to bring some novelty into his own writing. Tom Wolfe, on the other hand, was simply frustrated by the limited conventions of contemporary journalism and was seeking a breakthrough. However, there is more under the surface than just pure, egoistical experimentation with an art form. If we observe how New Journalism came to life,

it would seem as merely a coincidence in the history of writing, but other situations were unfolding in the US at that time.

With the beginning of the 1960's, American reality was undergoing a profound transformation. Stimulated by Kennedy's election and unleashed by his assassination, long-buried forces in the American psyche were coming to the surface with an almost eerie simultaneity in politics, in national and individual violence, in subcultures, in urban slums, in technology, in the young. Mass media journalism was not present as an added force, making its versions of these events part of the national consciousness. The individual American found himself daily confronted by realities that were as actual as they seemed fictive (a quality inherent partly in the events, and partly in the fact that television presented them in formulas of simple conflict and melodramatic action drawn from its fictional entertainments). Both novelists and reporters found themselves faced with situations demanding responses, situations for which they soon realized their tools were inadequate. (Hellman 2)

It is often assumed, when one tries to explain New Journalism's approach of *truth over fact*, that the form is a type of mixture between fiction and falsehood and journalism and truth. On the contrary, New Journalism is an attempt to merge the tools of the "fiction writing trade" with the facts and truths one discovers by journalistic method. New Journalism does not ignore the basic questions of journalism (who?, what?, where?, when?, why?) but tries to capture the larger truth that eludes a text based on these five basic questions. New Journalism tries to convey the actual experience of an event and not just simply diagnose it: "Wolfe has likewise emphasized his desire to communicate the *experience* and *meaning* of his subjects in their full ambiguities and complexities, through the use of such fictional devices as construction of scenes, dialogue, interior point of view, and the recording of significant details of dress and milieu" (Hellman 3).

However, when discussing *experience* and *meaning* one easily falls into the trap of being distrusted because of one's subjectivity, as *experience* and *meaning* are considered purely subjective phenomena. One tries to stop New Journalism in its tracks with a heated debate about objectivity versus subjectivity. But this is a view of the surface of this conflict of two forms of journalism i.e. conventional journalism and New Journalism. One must observe the foundation on which these two forms were built and the method with which each of these forms arrives at the truth:

Admirers of conventional journalism have portrayed the conflict with new journalism as one of objectivity versus subjectivity and fact versus fiction. However, it is actually a conflict of a disguised perspective versus an admitted one, and a corporate fiction versus a personal one. In either case, journalism is necessarily an extension of all human perception and communication in its fictional (that is, shaping) quality. Because it is a product of the human mind and language, journalism can never passively mirror the whole of reality, but must instead actively select, transform, and interpret it. The problem with conventional journalism is that, while it inevitably shares in these limitations (or opportunities), it nevertheless refuses to acknowledge the creative nature of its “news,” instead concealing the structuring mechanisms of its organizational mind behind masks of objectivity and fact. (Hellman 4)

## 2.1 New Journalism – A Fiction Truer Than Fact and Nonfiction?

Even after examining Tom Wolfe's theory of New Journalism and looking at crucial works of New Journalism such as Thompson's *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* or Michael Herr's *Dispatches* there is still a lot of confusion around the term of New Journalism. The methods of creating texts of New Journalism also remain inconsistent when we look at the abovementioned books. The writers sometimes do not adhere to the rule of specific devices of realistic fiction which comprise the structure of a text of New Journalism.

Wolfe himself has admitted in other places that he could only make *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and *The Right Stuff* work by abandoning strict adherence to these techniques in favor of summary narration and exposition. In addition, Wolfe and Hollowell, by suggesting that new journalism is consistently realistic, narrowly define the genre in terms of a single mode, when actually the major works reveal a much more diverse and innovative range of experimentation (Hellman 22).

In order to get a factual and closer look at what New Journalism actually is and what defines it as an art form, we must observe the crucial devices which are employed in these types of text and we must observe its subject matter, aesthetic form and purpose. The devices or techniques employed in New Journalism are usually: scene-by-scene construction, full record of dialogue, third-person point of view and incidental details surrounding the characters. However, focusing only on the techniques does not give us a full definition of a text of New Journalism. The aesthetic aspect of the text is not a matter of specific techniques which were used or a certain ideology which

it is embodying, but it is the text itself as an aesthetic construction of an artistic endeavor so that the text can stand by itself.

The new journalism is, in my view, most properly understood as a genre of literature. Like realistic fiction or romantic fiction or fabulist fiction, it has an aesthetic form and purpose making its “final direction” inward. Following Frye’s definition (quoted in the preceding chapter) that fiction is “a work of art in prose,” we may then without logical difficulty call new journalism fiction (Hellman 24).

In contrast to New Journalism, the direction of conventional journalism is outward and its purpose falls into the domain of being descriptive or assertive. These are the hallmarks of pure, nonfiction writing which usually contains close to zero literary merit when it comes to style, form, aesthetics and purpose. Whereas the aim of conventional journalism is to simply inform the reader, texts of New Journalism have another aim, which is to entertain the reader or e.g. provide him or her with an extraordinary accounting of a particular moment.

The world (not the techniques but the world) of fiction can be brought to the facts of journalism. In a work of new journalism the author is most interested in the effect and idea he can communicate by form. However exhaustive or important his reporting or analysis may be, his ultimate aim and achievement is an artistic one (Hellman 25).

However, even if we manage to differentiate between conventional journalism and New Journalism, we are still left with a dubious approach to truth which creates a certain amount of fear and distrust between the reader and the journalist or writer. This happens for a very simple reason: how can art, which occupies itself with style and form, be not even closer to the truth than conventional journalism, but how can it be close to the truth at all? The explanation to this worry is rather uncomplicated: while conventional journalism is purely descriptive or assertive and occupies itself with merely presenting the facts of an event in order to stay close to the truth, New Journalism, by employing techniques and forms found in other works of fiction, tries to become a factual event of experiences, which at the same time is presenting obvious facts of an event while reaching a step closer to the real world by imitating it as much as it possibly can.

Each author transforms his journalistic subject into a living text so that the reader does not merely read about events but participates in the author’s personal experience and interpretation of them. A reader goes to Mailer’s political journalism, for instance, not primarily for journalistic information but for the experience and lessons to be acquired from participating in his intensely meditative journey through our times. Likewise, a reader goes

to Thompson's "fear and loathing" to enjoy the power of the manic comic vision with which he counters the horrors we otherwise receive only passively in the news. In other words, the new journalists give us what literary artists have always given us—only they do so in direct confrontation with the news that has become our major shared experience in a media age. Their works are aesthetic experiences embodying the result of this confrontation between external events and personal mind—a microcosmic selection, shaping, and interpretation of events of the macrocosm into a text, a construct representing not events, but an individual consciousness's experience of them. (Hellman 25-26)

## 2.2. Gonzo Journalism – The Black Sheep of Journalism (and Literature)

When discussing gonzo journalism, it is, first of all, important to note that gonzo journalism greatly differs from other forms provided by New Journalism. Even though gonzo journalism came to existence around the same time as New Journalism, there are great distinctions between the two in so far that Hunter S. Thompson would not even consider himself as a journalist in comparison to Tom Wolfe. The other argument for distinction between gonzo journalism and New Journalism would be that New Journalism works on reconstructing the story after it has already happened, and it reflects on the story, whereas gonzo journalism's main focus is through hyper-subjectivity to be there, instantaneously in the story, to be a part of the story and to capture its essence.

### **Playboy: Is there a difference between Gonzo and the new journalism?**

**HST:** Yeah, I think so. Unlike Tom Wolfe or Gay Talese, for instance, I almost never try to reconstruct a story. They're both much better reporters than I am, but then I don't really think of myself as a reporter. Gonzo is just a word I picked up because I liked the sound of it—which is not to say there isn't a basic difference between the kind of writing I do and the Wolfe/Talese style. They tend to go back and re-create stories that have already happened, while I like to get right in the middle of whatever I'm writing about—as personally involved as possible. There's a lot more to it than that, but if we have to make a distinction, I suppose that's a pretty safe way to start. (Thompson and Hitchens 47)

As mentioned in the above section which discusses the text *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, gonzo journalism came to existence with the publishing of this article. In order to better define what gonzo journalism is, we will refer to the man who created gonzo journalism himself, and to literary theory which tries to give us definitions through systematic studies of the

subject matter, as Thompson's definition of gonzo journalism is too loose and does not fit academic writing, which asks for preciseness and methodical presentation of the subject matter.

### **Playboy: What is Gonzo Journalism?**

**HST:** It's something that grew out of a story on the Kentucky Derby for *Scanlan's* magazine. It was one of those horrible deadline scrambles and I ran out of time. I was desperate. Ralph Steadman had done the illustrations, the cover was printed and there was this horrible hole in the interviews. I was convinced I was finished, I'd blown my mind, couldn't work. So finally I just started jerking pages out of my notebook and numbering them and sending them to the printer. I was sure it was the last article I was ever going to do for anybody. Then when it came out, there were massive numbers of letters, phone calls, congratulations, people calling it a "great breakthrough in journalism." And I thought, "Holy shit, if I can write like this and get away with it, why should I keep trying to write like the *New York Times*?" It was like falling down an elevator shaft and landing in a pool full of mermaids. (Thompson and Hitchens 47)

In other words, Hunter S. Thompson's claim about gonzo journalism might even be more precise if we focus on his words in his own writing where he talks about gonzo journalism, describes his own work, and mentions the term *gonzo* for the first time: "But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism" (Thompson 7).

When discussing gonzo journalism one cannot fail to mention new journalism and vice versa, even though gonzo journalism seems not to adhere to the general rules set by new journalism. As we have mentioned already, the methods of new journalism are scene-by-scene construction, full record of dialogue, third-person point of view and incidental details surrounding the characters. Gonzo journalism, on the other hand, is way more chaotic, personal and paradoxically more realistic and specific only for its creator, Hunter S. Thompson:

[Gonzo] can only be defined as what Hunter Thompson does...It generally consists of the fusion of reality and stark fantasy in a way that amuses the author and outrages his audience. It is Point of View Run Wild. Gonzo requires virtually no re-writing, with the reporter and the quest for information as the focal point. Notes, snatches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams— these are elements of a piece of gonzo journalism. (Hirst 4)

The second most important device central to the gonzo style of journalism, next to his blending of fact and truth with fiction, might be the character of Thompson in his books. He creates a specific character who is split into two roles: the actor and the narrator. This character is a caricature of himself, which possesses a schizophrenic view of the world and through his psychotic ramblings manages to get at the heart of the issue. The advantage of a character of this much disorientation immersed in paranoid illusions, usually induced by alcohol and drugs, is that this character functions as a type of seer who manages to see and reveal what the ordinary eye does not.

Thompson achieves the freedom to break with realism by extending the central metafictional device in Mailer's *Armies of the Night*. He presents facts through two versions of the self, narrator and participant personae, who are separated by time and perspective. Since, as implied author, he presents all of the facts in the works as perceptions of one or the other of these personae, Mailer is free to develop the subject matter as his personal construct of actual events. By keeping differences in time and perspective negligible, Thompson creates only one persona who serves as both narrator and protagonist. This persona may appear at first as a simpler creation, a mere self-caricature; but that self-caricature is in fact a highly sophisticated tool, which the actual Hunter Thompson manipulates as calculatingly as Laurence Sterne did *Tristram Shandy*. (Hellman 68)

This all seems like a lot of theory and dubious interpretations when it comes to pinning down what gonzo actually is. The same case is made for the definition of literature, or what literature means. It is obvious though, that gonzo, while opposing the rules of conventional journalism, also opposes the rules of New Journalism and by doing so fits as much into literature as it does into journalism.



### 3. What Prototype Theory Says About Literature Being Literary

In order for this thesis to come to the stage, at which we can point at specific paragraphs, lines and even whole works of Hunter S. Thompson and proclaim that it is all literature, we first must present what makes literature literary. In doing so we will base our discussion on prototype theory, a type of cognitive science also applied in linguistics. However, literature as an art form possesses the same problem that gonzo journalism possesses, i.e. the definition of gonzo journalism depends on the point of view of the critic who is reviewing the work: “The definition depends on each critic’s perception. Hence, a scholar finds there is no canonical category for gonzo. As with New Journalism above, gonzo is a hybrid. To one who is a linear thinker who needs a categorical label for gonzo, it can be called a sub-genre of New Journalism” (Kiernan 31).

After looking at the citation above and seeing what a mess one gonzo journalist can create with his creations in the literary world, we will shift our perspective onto the broader picture of the world of literature itself, which will provide us with arguments and data on which we will base our arguments for the case that Hunter S. Thompson's writing is in fact literature as much as it is journalism. To demonstrate this complicated case, we can take into consideration Eagleton’s view on the elusive state of defining what literature is: “If there is such a thing as literary theory, then it would seem obvious that there is something called literature which it is the theory of. We can begin, then, by raising the question: what is literature” (Eagleton 1)?

What, then, is literature? In order to evade the usual clear-cut, dictionary definition of literature, we will refer to traits and characteristics of literary writing, which, when contained, make a creative art form known as literature. So, the terms which must be met in order for a text to be considered as literature, even though not all of the conditions must be met, are that: it is a written text marked by a specific use of language, it is written in a literary genre, it can be read aesthetically and has an aesthetic purpose, and it is open to interpretation. According to Meyers' suggestion:

prototypical literary works:

- are written texts
- are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter
- are in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama)
- are read aesthetically

-are intended by the author to be read aesthetically

-contain many weak implicatures (are deliberately somewhat open in interpretation). (3-4)

The first characteristic, that literary works are written texts, is spot on even though the characteristic itself is somewhat dangerous, as we then become open to the possibility of naming everything ever written under the sun as literature, i.e. commercials, brochures and business cards, etc. could be considered literature. However, according to prototype theory, claiming certain, highly unlikely literary texts such as the abovementioned examples will not be appreciated as such.

I have no objection; these characteristics, remember, are not a checklist which will keep some texts out of the category of literature. However, prototype theory suggests that there will be less agreement on calling these literature, and that those speakers of English who do so will express less confidence that everyone will agree with them. (Meyer 4)

The second characteristic: a specific or careful use of language is one of great importance. When we observe each individual text, the first thing we might notice is the use of language. The writer's or poet's main tools are words after all. Even though there are other types of texts, such as an essay, in which their creator carefully observes his or her use of words and deliberately tries to construct an unusual or unconventional text, it is safe to say that these works are usually not literature, at least not prototypical literature, as they do not satisfy the third characteristic, which is that these texts are usually written in a literary genre of poetry, prose fiction or drama. Furthermore, Meyer simply suggests that works written in prose fiction, poetry or drama created a better example of what literature is than works written as personal essays or other texts, which are also noted for their careful use of language:

This characteristic may also provide some explanation for the use of the word *literature* to mean the published research in a particular field: such literature, in addition to be written text, must also exhibit features of careful use of language according to particular standards. However, personal essays and researched articles do not meet the third characteristic: prototypical literary works are written in the literary genres of poetry, prose fiction, and drama. Note that I am not restricting the term *literature* to these three genres; rather, I suggest that works in these three genres provide, to speakers of English, the best examples of the word *literature*. Works in other genres are often considered literature, but again terminology which is used to describe such works—terms like *literary non-fiction*—indicate that such texts are not prototypical literary works. (Meyer 4)

The fourth characteristic which we will focus on is aesthetics. When discussing aesthetics, we try to explore the reader's connection to the given text: "For the term 'literature', I believe it is important to note that prototypical literary works cannot be identified solely on the basis of their written forms. We must also consider the way in which readers interact with them" (Meyer 4-5). The term aesthetic, which we are focusing at the moment, will be used on the basis of Louise Rosenblatt, who Jim Meyer quotes in his work *What is literature? A definition based on prototypes*. Meyers explains how he has used the term aesthetic and aesthetic reading in his work:

I have used the term 'aesthetic' as proposed by Louise Rosenblatt in her work *The Reader; the Text, the Poem: The transactional theory of the literary work* (1978). This is her definition of aesthetic reading: The reader performs very different activities during aesthetic and non-aesthetic readings. The contrast derives primarily from the different in the reader's focus of attention during the reading-event. In nonaesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (23-24).

In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading event. Though, like the efferent reader of a law text, say, the reader of Frost's "Birches" must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, he also pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him. "Listening to" himself, he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure. In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text (Rosenblatt 1978:23-25; emphasis in the original). (Meyer 5)

Simply put, a non-aesthetic reader reads works and texts in order to obtain certain factual information or facts. It is true that while engaging in aesthetic reading we may remember some of the factual information we have processed, however that was not our aim or goal. This can be explained by a usual instance through which every aesthetic reader has gone through at least once: there are certain books or texts, which we have re-read a multitude of times, even though we may even know the whole text by heart. However, there is an additional term which must be considered regarding the aesthetic characteristic of a work of literary intention. There must be an additional idea behind the creator of the text. What this means is that the author did not simply create a piece of writing for the sole purpose of writing, but with an intention which can be discovered. John Meyer gives us an example from an essay by Walter Pater on the subject of the Renaissance. Walter Pater's style of writing is extreme when it comes to the usual aesthetics of writing an essay, i.e. it

can hardly be viewed as a usual essay. This was portrayed later by William Butler Yeats, who extracted one of the sentences from Pater's essay and simply put it into the form of a poem, which will be presented below. What this means is that, if the reader were to meet this text in the form of a poem, it would be much easier for him or her to decide that it is a poem. This is a prime example showcasing that literary works are much easily recognized as such when they appear in a specific literary genre. In addition, the fact is that Pater never intended for this to be regarded as a poem, which leaves us feeling less secure about our choice in calling this piece of writing a poem.

Mona Lisa

Walter Pater

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;  
Like the Vampire,  
She has been dead many times,  
And learned the secrets of the grave;  
And has been a diver in deep seas,  
And keeps their fallen day about her;  
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;  
And, as Leda,  
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,  
And, as St Anne,  
Was the mother of Mary;  
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,  
And lives  
Only in the delicacy  
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,  
And tinged the eyelids and the hands. (Meyer 6)

Finally, the last characteristic, which helps us in deciding if a particular piece of writing is to

be considered as literature or not is its openness to interpretation and weak implicatures. That is to say, some writers or authors, when working on a particular piece of their writing, carefully decide what it is that they are trying to convey and how much of it are they actually willing to convey, and how much of it will they leave to the reader to discover or imagine. These writers are aiming at a specific trait of literature, which is called the poetic effect. The aim of these writers is to create a text which the reader is supposed to experience, they are supposed to find themselves inside the text, inside the story, inside the beautiful surroundings of a poem which it is trying to depict, while simultaneously trying to come to their own conclusions around the question of what is happening and why. Commenting on the aims of writers and the multitude of interpretations that texts may offer Meyer explains that:

in some utterances, the speaker or writer does not have one particular meaning to convey; rather, speakers are invited to pursue many different interpretations without the assumption that they will find the sole correct one. Their reward lies, not in getting the information, but in experiences a greater sense of intimacy with the writer. And this is the definition of poetic effect which these authors suggest: “the effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures” (Blakemore 1992:157). This is the final characteristic I propose for a prototypical literary work: a prototypical literary work contains many weak implicatures, so that readers are invited to think of many propositions which are only weakly present. (7)

All in all, these are the characteristics on which we will base our analysis of certain lines, paragraphs and even whole books in the body of work of Hunter S. Thompson in order to convey that his writing and his specific style of gonzo journalism are in fact literature.

#### 4. Hunter S. Thompson's Writing as Literature

As we have seen above from Meyer's theory on prototypical characteristics of a literary text, these will be our guidelines and criteria when analyzing several of Hunter S Thompson's works in order to argue that these texts are in fact literary texts. In order to avoid being repetitive by constructing this thesis in a way that it gives an argument followed by an example from Thompson's writing, and then repeats this same argument and confirms it by giving another example from another piece of his writing, one argument will be provided and supported by examples from all the works, mentioned in the introduction.

The first point, that literary texts need to be written texts is of course satisfied as *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved* was written by Thompson and published as a piece of writing by *Scanlan's Monthly*, as were his other written texts which we have mentioned in the introduction: *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* which first appeared in written form in 1966 published by Random House, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* which was first published as a two-part series in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1971, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* which was published as a book in 1973, but derived from his various articles serialized in *Rolling Stone* in 1972.

The second point, which notes the careful use of language i.e. metaphors, elegant syntax, etc. is one of the points in which Thompson's writing truly shines. Even though we will argue for this point by providing samples of his writing, which satisfy this criteria, we deem it necessary to show how Thompson, before he became a famous published author, practiced his writing skill by copying other literary works, which makes it doubtful if other journalists ever approached journalism in this way. Thompson explains the impact this practice had on him as he admits: "The thing about typing other people's work was really an eye opener to me. I just started doing it. I had Dos Passos\*—that's where I got a lot of my style stuff, the newsreels up at the beginning of his chapters. I came to Fitzgerald early" (Thompson and Hutchinson 205).

Thompson recognized the writing skills of others, but it is also evident that his own writing style was distinct. The following paragraph from *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, as Meyer noted, shows a careful use of language. The paragraph is about Thompson's vision of the prototypical savage and primitive man of the Kentucky derby, the symbol of decadence and depravity which looms over the race he was supposed to cover with his illustrator Ralph Steadman.

He comments on the inception of these kind of people by comparing them to breeding animals. His style is sharp, on point and poetic in a raw manner.

He had done a few good sketches, but so far we hadn't seen that special kind of face that I felt we would need for a lead drawing. It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every Derby I'd ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry—a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture. One of the key genetic rules in breeding dogs, horses or any other kind of thoroughbred is that close inbreeding tends to magnify the weak points in a bloodline as well as the strong points. In horse breeding, for instance, there is a definite risk in breeding two fast horses who are both a little crazy. The offspring will likely be very fast and also very crazy. So the trick in breeding thoroughbreds is to retain the good traits and filter out the bad. But the breeding of humans is not so wisely supervised, particularly in a narrow Southern society where the closest kind of inbreeding is not only stylish and acceptable, but far more convenient--to the parents--than setting their offspring free to find their own mates, for their own reasons and in their own ways. ("Goddam, did you hear about Smitty's daughter? She went crazy in Boston last week and married a nigger!") (Thompson 17)

However, even though we may note that in *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved* Thompson is already playing with language as writers of literature usually do, his style and his delivery of the written word become even more prominent in his later writing, where he is showcasing how much he has mastered the art of writing. For example, the following passage from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which is also known as "the wave speech," is famous for its quality of capturing the hippie zeitgeist and its end which Thompson lived through. The passage itself is highly poetic and vivid and is considered the peak of his writing.

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Sixseems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it *meant something*. Maybe not, in the long run... but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were here and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant...

History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of "history" it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole

generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.

My central memory of that time seems to hang on one or five or maybe forty nights—or very early mornings—when I left the Filmore half-crazy and, instead of going home, aimed the big 650 Lightning across the Bay Bridge at a hundred miles an hour wearing L.L. Bean shorts and a Butte sheepherder's jacket... booming through the Treasure Island tunnel at the lights of Oakland and Berkeley and Richmond, not quite sure which turn-off to take when I got to the other end (always stalling at the toll-gate, too twisted to find neutral while I fumbled for change)... but being absolutely certain that no matter which way I went I would come to a place where people were just as high and wild as I was: No doubt at all about that...

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 a 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. (Thompson 31)

We can observe furthermore Thompson's careful use of language in his earlier works, which were not so distinctive when it comes to this specific skill of literary writing. However, in the example presented below, Thompson writes about the phenomenon of "the edge." When writing about this phenomenon, his use of language creates a feeling as if this phenomenon was not just real, but alive like a human being, and he even capitalizes the noun which he is describing as if it were its name.

The Edge...There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. The others—the living—are those who pushed their control as far as they felt they could handle it, and then pulled back, or slowed down, or did whatever they had to when it came time to choose between Now and Later. But



the edge is still Out there. (Thompson 148)

The third point is that for a text to be considered literature it should be written in a literary genre such as poetry, prose fiction or drama. Since we have already explained above what defines gonzo, i.e. the mixture of truth or fact and fiction, we will drive our point further by arguing that *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved* is not only a mixture of truth or fact and fiction, but it is prose fiction in a loose manner, namely his writing contains a certain plot or event that he is explaining to the reader.

By this time Ralph wouldn't order coffee; he kept asking for more water. "It's the only thing they have that's fit for human consumption," he explained. Then, with an hour or so to kill before he had to catch the plane, we spread his drawings out on the table and pondered them for a while, wondering if he'd caught the proper spirit of the thing...but we couldn't make up our minds. His hands were shaking so badly that he had trouble holding the paper, and my vision was so blurred that I could barely see what he'd drawn. "Shit," I said. "We both look worse than anything you've drawn here." He smiled. "You know--I've been thinking about that," he said. "We came down here to see this teddible scene: people all pissed out of their minds and vomiting on themselves and all that...and now, you know what? It's us..." (Thompson 21)

Still considering the third point, Thompson's book about Hell's Angels is not so distinctive when it comes to the part about fiction in his writing. However, the book closely details his experience living with this Motorcycle gang while he is slowly losing himself in his investigation, or as he himself put it: "I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them" (Thompson and Hitchens 313). However, even though this is Thompson's first attempt at a nonfiction novel, it is not necessary for literary writing to be purely fiction in order to be considered literature. Also, it is questionable how much of the actual book is fiction and how much is actual fact.

On other hand, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* are prime examples of gonzo journalism at its peak. In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, a book which was created on the basis of real-life events, i.e. the 1972 presidential campaign that Thompson was commenting over a span of 12 months, this book is notable for its unconventional style where he uses vulgarity, ridicules himself, and humorously exaggerates events.

If I'd written all the truth I knew for the past ten years, about 600 people - including me - would be rotting in prison cells from Rio to Seattle today. Absolute truth is a very rare and dangerous commodity in the context of professional journalism. " (Thompson 247)

"Live steady. Don't fuck around. Give anything weird a wide berth -- including people. It's not worth it. I learned this the hard way, through brutal overindulgence. ...Back to Chicago; it's never dull out there. You never know exactly what kind of terrible shit is going to come down on you in that town, but you can always count on \*something\*. Every time I go to Chicago I come away with scars. (Thompson 150)

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is considered to be a *roman à clef*, which is defined as a "a novel in which real persons or actual events figure under disguise" (Merriam-Webster). It follows Thompson and his friend and attorney Acosta disguised as Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo on their journey to Las Vegas, where they need to report on a race. Even though Thompson deemed this novel as a failed experiment in gonzo journalism, it is manic in its psychedelic depiction of reality or facts which surrounded the writer and his friend on their trip. The following passage illustrates the perfect blend of fact and fiction, or of a reality distorted by drugs told by a voice on the constant edge of insanity:

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. 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 a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. (Thompson 1)

The fourth and the fifth point are aesthetics of a given work and the intention of the author for his work to be aesthetic. When considering aesthetics, we are discussing what kind of relationship there is between the reader and the text. If it is, as we have already mentioned above, a relationship based only on acquiring certain information from a specific text, as the case usually is when it comes to journalism and other forms of "dry" writing, we are safe to say that there are no aesthetics. However, if the reader is ready to read the text again and again, even though he or she knows the outcome and if the text is invoking a certain emotion from the reader, then we can safely say that we are in the field of aesthetics. Thompson's nonfiction novel about the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang can be read indefinitely by the reader in order to experience how it was once upon a time to be a member of this gang. As the following excerpt illustrates his novel invokes the feeling of being a dangerous biker stranded on the wide continent of the US.

California, Labor Day weekend. . . early, with ocean fog still in the streets, outlaw motorcyclists wearing chains, shades and greasy Levi's roll out from damp garages, all-night diners and cast-off one-night pads in Frisco, Hollywood, Berdoo and East Oakland, heading for the Monterey peninsula, north of Big Sur. . . The Menace is loose again, the Hell's Angels, the hundredcarat headline, running fast and loud on the early morning freeway, low in the saddle, nobody smiles, jamming crazy through traffic and ninety miles an hour down the center stripe, missing by inches. . . like Genghis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with a fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can and up your daughter's leg with no quarter asked and none given; show the squares some class, give em a whiff of those kicks they'll never know. . . Ah, these righteous dudes, they love to screw it on. . . Little Jesus, the Gimp, Chocolate George, Buzzard, Zorro, Hambone, Clean Cut, Tiny, Terry the Tramp, Frenchy, Mouldy Marvin, Mother Miles, Dirty Ed, Chuck the Duck, Fat Freddy, Filthy Phil, Charger Charley the Child Molester, Crazy Cross, Puff, Magoo, Animal and at least a hundred more. . . tense for the action, long hair in the wind, beards and bandanas flapping, earrings, armpits, chain whips, swastikas and stripped-down Harleys flashing chrome as traffic on 101 moves over, nervous, to let the formation pass like a burst of dirty thunder. . . (Thompson 1)

Would you as a reader want to know what it's like to be surrounded by savage hicks while you yourself are in the midst of a psychotic episode constantly fueled by more and more drugs and alcohol while trying to catch a glimpse of a race, which is supposed to give the viewers thrills never felt before, only to realize, that while you are ruminating and berating this backwards crowd, you have become one of them? Of course, the facts are there: there was a race, there was a winner, there was a crowd, all the expected information was covered. But if just the basic facts are what interests you, why would you read Hunter S. Thompson's log of the race unless your true interest lies in what is happening amidst the crowd as the following passage shows:

Creeping Jesus, I thought. That screws the press credentials. I had a vision of some nerve-rattling geek all covered with matted hair and string-warts showing up in the press office and demanding Scanlan's press packet. Well...what the hell? We could always load up on acid and spend the day roaming around the clubhouse grounds with bit sketch pads, laughing hysterically at the natives and swilling mint juleps so the cops wouldn't think we're abnormal. Perhaps even make the act pay; set up an easel with a big sign saying, "Let a Foreign Artist Paint Your Portrait, \$10 Each. Do It NOW!" (Thompson 15)

The same can be said for the counterculture movement of the 1960's, but what if you wanted to know how it felt to be a part of a wide, energetic movement of people high on the possibility of change and social success? History books can easily depict what actually happened, where the movement started, what the aims and goals were, and how the movement spread, but can they truly depict what was actually happening? In Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* the reader is taken on a manic drug trip, observing how the dust of the hippie movement is finally settling and not just being fed answers to the five core questions of journalism.

No doubt they all Got What Was Coming To Them. All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit. But their loss and failure is ours too. What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped create...a generation of permanent cripples failed seekers who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody or at least some force is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel. This is the same cruel and paradoxically benevolent bullshit that has kept the Catholic Church going for so many centuries. (Thompson 81)

To the average person who is mostly involved in their own day-to-day life routine something complicated as the machinery of politics always seemed sketchy and shady. We know the candidates and their goals, and in the end we know the score and who won, but do we actually know what is going on behind these campaigns? Would we like to feel how it is to observe and stalk with a cautious pair of eyes these great men who are supposed to handle our future, or would we just simply like to know the score at the end of the game? Readers who are eager to experience the goings-on behind the scenes behind the scenes will find what they are looking for in texts like the following: "A lot of blood has gone under the bridge since then, and we have all learned a hell of a lot about the realities of Politics in America. Even the politicians have learned – but, as usual, the politicians are much slower than the people they want to lead" (Thompson 180).

However, even though these books seem to possess the aesthetics which Meyer talks about, what about aesthetic intent? Did Thompson have any aesthetic intent while creating these pieces of writing? According to his own words, he realized that he was an exceptional journalist, but he also realized he was an exceptional writer. "To be able to earn a living as a freelance writer in this country is damned hard; there are very few people who can do that. *Hell's Angels* all of a sudden proved to me that, Holy Jesus, maybe I can do this. I knew I was a good journalist. I knew I was a good writer, but I felt like I got through a door just as it was closing." (Thomson).

However, to fully realize his aesthetic intent, we are forced once more to quote Thompson when he talks about his own writing. For Thompson, as the quote below will show, journalism was just a medium, just a way to get his message across, while his true focus was on the writing itself, on being an artist.

**HST:** I'm not a reporter, I'm a writer. Nobody gives Norman Mailer this kind of shit. I've never tried to pose as a goddamn reporter. I don't defend what I do in the context of straight journalism, and if some people regard me as a reporter who's gone bad rather than a writer who's just doing his job—well, they're probably the same dingbats who think John Chancellor's an acid freak and Cronkite is a white slaver. (Thompson and Hitchens 54)

Our last point which discusses what it means for writing to be considered literary writing or writing as an art form is the openness of the text to multiple interpretations. This is especially interesting for Thompson's writing as he was regarded as a journalist and his writing as journalism, and it is known that the main aim of a journalist and his writing is to share facts and information with the public. However, when reading gonzo journalism, even though we have access to facts and information about a certain event which is discussed in these texts, these facts, as we have already seen in the definitions of gonzo journalism and new journalism, are simply the basis which provide a structure on which the journalist or writer is trying to reconstruct something more than the factual event. Simply put, the facts themselves simply stay facts, but the surrounding environment of the text sheds a multitude of plausible lights on the facts themselves, thereby giving the reader an opportunity to conclude what is happening around these facts and what the facts themselves actually mean. This is exemplified in the following passages from Thompson's writing, which serve as concrete examples of the openness of his texts to interpretation:

Not much has been written about The Ibogaine Effect as a serious factor in the Presidential Campaign, but toward the end of the Wisconsin primary race— about a week before the vote—word leaked out that some of Muskie's top advisors had called in a Brazilian doctor who was said to be treating the candidate with “some kind of strange drug” that nobody in the press corps had ever heard of. [...] 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 for an answer because I was permanently barred from the Muskie campaign after

that incident on the “Sunshine Special” in Florida and that scene makes far more sense now than it did at the time. (Thompson 113)

Regardless of the fact that these passages were intended as a prank by Thompson, they provide us with multiple insights into the nature of what was actually happening and question why he did this in the first place. His works are filled with passages of this sort of provocative nature and the following is just one possible interpretation for one of them:

Under the headline "Big Ed Exposed as Ibogaine Addict," in the April chapter of the serialized work, Thompson claimed that Muskie was addicted to a hallucinogenic drug called ibogaine. The prank was intended in part to test the gullibility of his fellow members of the press, who apparently proved susceptible to running with the false story. In the work, HST colorfully described the effect of the drug on Muskie, "given the known effects of ibogaine... Muskie's brain was almost paralyzed by hallucinations... he looked out at the crowd and saw gila monsters instead of people. (Rabbe)

## Conclusion

As much as Hunter S. Thompson liked to use the word *strange* when describing his various experiences, so must we too use the word *strange* when discussing his writing and the method of gonzo journalism. All in all, as with any great artists, it is hard to pin down exactly what was it that made his work and method magical and artistic. We have seen that the method of gonzo journalism does not adhere to the rules of conventional journalism and that it also does not adhere to the rules of New Journalism. Gonzo journalism is a category by itself and for itself. We have seen that the conventions of the method of gonzo journalism is journalism as much as it is literature. It dances on the edge, as Thompson himself would have called it, of fiction and fact. The gonzo method of journalism itself is focused on experiencing something, while simply noting the ongoing data of the event. Simply put, gonzo happens through experiences which are subsequently described in full detail.

It can also be safely said that the Thompson's works presented in this paper satisfy the criteria for what makes literature literary according to the prototypical theory of Jim Meyer, i.e. they are written texts authored in his own way of carefully using language. These works easily fall into the category of prose fiction, even though they are considered works of journalism which concerns itself with facts. As for the aesthetic argument, we can easily conclude that even today Thompson's work is being read again and again for the experience, unlike the works of other traditional and more plain journalists. For the most part, readers are simply not concerned with the facts of the past, and when they are, they read books about history and not journalistic writings. But Hunter S. Thompson's work is still well and alive in today's age, because his writing is the foundation of gonzo journalism, which today is a popular and well-known style of journalism. The last criterion was the case of openness to various interpretations. When reading Thompson's work everything remains so open that we might even find ourselves doubting and interpreting simple journalistic facts. As a writer Thompson never intended just to spread the facts related to an event but wanted the readers to immerse themselves in the event and offer them the choice to try and come to their own conclusions, which was never the case in traditional journalism.

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