



Psychological Degradation of the Main Character in the Novel “The Executioner’s Song” by Norman Mailer

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with psychological problems of the main character of Norman Mailer’s novel “Executioner’s Song” Gary Gilmore, who enters the world of crime due to lack of love and constant nervousness in his childhood. As a teenager, Gary began to be engaged in petty crimes, going out on the streets to escape from the ongoing terrors and moral abuse in his family. Naturally, a child who did not feel light and love in his family could not show love, empathy to the people around him. As a result he always felt pain committing various crimes. Incredibly, Gilmore scored 133 at an IQ test, moreover, scored high marks both at aptitude and achievement tests. Nevertheless, unfortunate he dropped out of high school in the 9th grade despite his artistic and intellectual talent

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One of the pioneering documentary novels – “The Executioner's Song” is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Norman Mailer that follows the life of Gary Gilmore, a man sentenced to death for a murder in Utah. Most importantly, the author depicts the social and political environment that led the hero to the crime. In fact, this documentary novel, which reflects various social issues, was a finalist for the 1980 National Book Award.

Distinguished by its recognition of Gilmore's personality and the aftermath of his murders, the documentary has been central to various national debates over the Supreme Court's reinstatement of the death penalty. Strikingly, Gary Gilmore was the first person executed in the United States after the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

If we search for the information about his background, in 1976, 35-year-old Gary Gilmore was convicted of armed robbery in Indiana and sentenced to 13 years in prison.

However, he was released earlier according to the strict criteria; afterwards he went to Utah to live with his cousin Brenda Nicole. Brenda agreed to be his sponsor; simultaneously she supported, tried to direct him to the right path, as well as, helped him to find a job. Unexpectedly, when his life was going on with the hope for the bright future, Gilmore meets Nicola Baker, to whom, despite her young age, she became a 19-year-old widow with two children. To their lucky or unlucky chance, their relationship started to be closer than ever. Warmth that began with friendship led to romance. Despite his efforts to change himself in a positive way, Gilmore often suffered from emotional disorder and lack of self-control, resulting in immoral acts such as aggression, theft, and drug use.

Soon after breaking up with Nicola, Gilmore killed two men in two separate robberies. After that, Gilmore, who could not live up to the expectations of his cousin Brenda

Nicole, he was handed over to the police by Brenda Nicole herself. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death at a trial in September. However, the verdict was overturned 3 times. Remarkably, Gilmore was in the national media and community spotlight after fighting to have his execution carried out as quickly as possible. Without any doubt, Gilmore was aware of his upcoming punishment. Gilmore's willingness to die without rebellion, without a fight, or even demand, caused quite a stir among the public. Surprisingly, there were so many people who believed in Gilmore's innocence, and hold strong belief about that he did not commit the murder. Unavoidably, the case of Gilmore's crime, condemn society, the government, and Gilmore's family. Thousands of people observed Gilmore's trials, hoping for his acquittal and survival. Simultaneously, dozens of letters were received in Gilmore's name almost every day. These letters included everything from sincere wishes to expressions of love for Gary.

"I want to express my gratitude to the thousands of people who have sent me letters over the past few weeks. I received letters from all over the world. Thank you for your attention. These letters were full of sympathy, love and care. There are a lot of good, sincere people in the world."

In prison, Gary and his girlfriend Nicole, who came to see him on a regular basis, agreed to commit suicide, resulting in them falling into a coma for a short period in November. On January 17, 1977, after appeals conducted by lawyers on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union (against Gilmore's wishes) were decisively rejected by the US Supreme Court, Gilmore was executed by the method of his own choice: by firing squad [1, 4]. In general, he was the first person to be executed by trial in the United States since Louis Monge was executed in a gas chamber in Colorado on June 2, 1967.

The documentary novel consists of three parts, based entirely on interviews and conversations with Gilmore and his family, friends, and family members of the murder victims. First, the social environment and

factors that led to the murder, the scenes of the trial and the execution are narrated, it should be noted that the novel is based entirely on documents and facts. In particular, more attention has been paid to Gary's decision to seek execution rather than proceed with the appeals process. The first part of the novel presents in details Gilmore's childhood, including his time in prison for juvenile delinquency, including his release on certain arrangement, and his personal relationships during that time. The second part focuses on Gilmore's trial, particularly his refusal to appeal the death sentence, his conversations with Lawrence Schiller, and his lawyers' ongoing fight to save Gary's life. Naturally, all these processes included documents and face-to-face meetings with the characters of the novel.

In interviews with journalists, Norman Mailer expressed his motivation to conduct long-term face-to-face interviews with everyone associated with Gilmore, to record them, "In Gilmore's childhood tortures, I have felt and experienced all my life, almost similar memories. I understood his existence," the writer recalls in his memories. In another interview, Norman Mailer said, perhaps the most important theme of the book, "We have important choices to make in life, and one of them may be the thoughtful and dangerous choice most of us have now between dying and 'saving one's soul.'"

In his analysis of *The Hangman's Song*, literary critic Mark Edmundson said: "From the moment Gilmore is convinced that he is ready to die, he acquires a certain dignity [...] Gilmore has developed a romantic belief. From the moment Gilmore is imprisoned, he believes himself to be worthy of dying, and is willing to end his life that way".

Norman Mailer describes Gary Gilmore's life as it was in the multi-page novel "The Executioner's Song", based on documents and facts. That is, in 1976, he was found guilty of the death of two people in the state of Utah and sentenced a death penalty. The novel focuses on the murders, trial, and execution of Gary Gilmore, as well as the lives of the people he interacted with. The writer tries to objectively

evaluate the main factors in the process leading up to Gary Gilmore's crime, not limited to the life of Gary Gilmore himself and his loved ones. Considerably, in the middle of the 20th century, the social and political life in America was completely different; therefore the society was in an incomprehensible disorder. Situations such as unemployment, homelessness, carelessness, indifference and ignorance have reached their peak – especially the rise of crime among young people was one of the most painful points. Given the above, the writer leaves to the readers themselves to consider the circumstances that caused the crime in a certain sense.

Now, it is worth to analyze the life, family background and childhood of the main character, Gary Mark Gilmore, whose real name was Fae Robert Coffman, an American born on December 4, 1940, who confessed to the murder in Utah without any pressure, without rebelling against the sentence, even he came to the public's attention by rejecting the reasons given for his survival. As we mentioned above, he became the first person executed in the United States in nearly a decade after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a new version of a death penalty statutes in the 1976 *Greg v. Georgia* decision. These new statutes overcame the 1972 ruling in *Furman v. Georgia*, which ruled that previous death penalty laws were "cruel and unusual" punishment and therefore unconstitutional. (The Supreme Court had previously ordered all states to replace the death penalty with life in prison after *Furman v. Georgia*.) Gilmore was convicted of the shooting in 1977 and executed. His life and execution were the subject of Norman Mailer's documentary novel "The Executioner's Song" (1979).

Gary Mark Gilmore was born on December 4, 1940, in McKamey, Texas, the second of four sons to Frank and Bessie Gilmore. In addition to Gary, the children in the family were Frank, Gaylen, writer and musician, journalist Mikal Gilmore. Senior Frank Harry Gilmore, the head of the family, an alcohol addicted person, who had other wives and families, but he did not support any of them financially, socially, or spiritually. By choice, he

married Bessie, a Mormon tribe from Provo, Utah, in Sacramento, California. Gary was born while the family was living in Texas under the family name Coffman to avoid the law. Frank christens his son Faye Robert with the surname Coffman, but when they leave Texas, Bessie changes it to Gary Mark. The name change was regarded as the most striking point of his life later, though Gary's mother probably never would have done this, had she known it would turn her life upside down. Frank's mother, Faye, kept the original "Faye Coffman" birth certificate, which Gary unluckily found twenty years later. It was a pity to say that this event would be the beginning of a tragic life for Gary. Gary assumed he was illegitimate or someone else's son. He also denoted to understand why he never got along with his father. When Gary's mother tried to explain to him the reason for the name change, he did not listen, got upset, angry and run out into the street. As a result, he did not even imagine that he had entered the life of juvenile crime.

In the Gilmore's family, the theme of illegitimacy, fraud, and conspiracy was commonplace. Perhaps, it is not surprising that such vices as the root of the family itself, wrong living, dirty eating, neglect of children, lack of fear of others were paid with Gary's life. Frank Senior's mother, Faye Gilmore, told her daughter-in-law, Bessie, that Frank's father was a famous magician in Sacramento, where he used to live. Moreover, Bessie researched the family tree in the library and concluded that Frank was Harry Houdini's illegitimate son. In fact, Houdini was only sixteen years old in 1890, the year Frank Gilmore was born, and only then began his magic career. Thus, his mother-in-law, Faye, insisted that Frank's father was the man who later became known as a famous magician. Gary's younger brother, Michal Gilmore, believed the story was just a lie or fiction, but both his father and mother believed it.

During Gary's childhood, the family often moved around the Western United States, and Frank supported them financially by selling fake magazine subscriptions. Gary had a bad relationship with his father, whom his brother Michal described as "a cruel and

unintelligent man". Children's lives begin with loving their parents; children learn from them as they grow up; and sometimes they forgive them. Frank Gilmore was strict and had a bad temper, and often punished his sons, Gary, and Gaylen, with a razor, a whip, or a belt for no apparent reason. He also beat his wife almost on a daily basis. However, there were times when the father's heart softened as he got older. Gary's brother Michal said that Frank only whipped him once and never did it again after Michal told him, "I hate you." In addition, on many occasions Frank and Bessie would argue loudly and verbally abuse each other. Frank teased Bessie for being crazy, mocked at her, and pushed various slanderous stones at her. And Bessie, in revenge, called him a "Cat-licker" [Catholic] and threatened to kill him one day. These abuses escalated over the years, causing depression and great turmoil in Gary Gilmore's family, especially in his own life.

Naturally, in this process, the background of Gary's family and the unhealthy environment in it, the proximity to chaos, the instability of the family environment, definitely affected the future of the whole family.

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