Woman in *The Armies of The Night*

Candidate's thesis

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Abstrakti

Tämä tutkielma analysoi naisen ja naiseuden kuvauksia Norman Mailerin teoksessa *The Armies of The Night*. Tutkimusmenetelminä käytettiin Greimasin strukturaalista semantiikkaa ja Kristevan semanalyysia. Greimasin strukturaalisen semantiikan keinoin muodostettiin naisen ja naiseuden semanttinen rakenne niistä termeistä, joita Mailer naisten kuvauksessa käyttää. Kristevan semanalyysilla selitetään tämän rakenteen merkitystä psykoanalyyttisen tulkinnan kannalta. Tutkielma on avoimesti poliittinen, päämääränään paljastaa naisvihamielinen painotus Mailerin teoksessa.

Analyysin tulokset osoittivat, että *The Armies of The Night* sisältää naisvihamielisen tendenssin. Tämä käy yksiin Millettin arvion kanssa Mailerista Millettin teoksessa *Sexual Politics*. Mailerin teoksessa sukupuoli nähdään akselina, jossa mieheys ja naiseus ovat binaarisessa oppositiossa. Mieheys on tämän akselin primaari osapuoli. Naiset esitetään johdonmukaisesti miehen halun kohteina, uhreina tai omistuksina, ja heidän omat toimensa passiivisina tai miesten toimista riippuvaisena. Tendenssin psykoanalyyttisessa tulkinnassa nähtiin yhtäläisyys Freudin kuvaamien ja Mitchellin ja Kristevan muokkaamien oidipuskompleksin ja kastraatiopelkojen teorioiden kanssa.

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1 Introduction

According to Morris (1993: 167), poststructuralist views of literature have been influential in feminist studies since the early 1980's. Feminist scholars in the period generally welcomed poststructuralist theories warmly, which Morris (ibid.) credits to the explanatory power of these theories in the problem of patriarchal power structures and their resilience. The poststructural theories themselves can be seen as the continuation of structuralist thinking (Nöth 1990: 298). Common with these approaches is the gap they perceive between the reality and language: language is a system or a structure meant to correspond with another structure, reality. Morris (1993: 164-165) connects the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan with the development of structuralism and poststructuralism. Indeed, application of psychoanalytic approach in literary criticism has since become a significant discipline (Koskela and Rojola 2000: 87).

Norman Mailer's *The Armies of The Night*[1] is one of the author's most significant non-fiction books. For instance Millett (1977: 314) credits the Pulitzer Prize-winning work for its depiction of the contemporary United States. In his *Armies*, Mailer depicts the anti-war protest march on the Pentagon in Washington D.C. in the fall of 1967. He himself is present as an object of narration from the third-person view, and it is thus he explains his own actions and views as an agent with a novel use of novelistic techniques in non-fictional writing. I find *Armies* to be an interesting object for feminist literary criticism, due to the fact that Millett (1977: 314-335) thoroughly examined the underlying misogyny in Mailer's

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[1] Henceworth *Armies*.

fictional works and painted a portrait of the man as an antagonist to feminist movement. It will be fascinating to see whether similar tendencies will be present in Mailer's non-fictional work. In the present study, I will combine structural, poststructural and psychoanalytic approaches to depict and analyse the woman and the feminine in *Armies*.

2 Structural/Poststructural

2.1 Greimas's structural semantics

Structural approach to literature owes much to de Saussure's theory of language as a sign-system. De Saussure (1966: 65-67) defined 'sign' with a binary model of a **signifier** and a **signified** (*signifiant* and *signifié*) in which the signifier, e.g. word, is an arbitrary entity denoting an entity in reality, the signified. According to de Saussure (1966: 67), the 'sign' is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified. In other words, there are no signs in which that which is signified exists without a signifier, nor a signifier without something that is signified. Furthermore, it is evident that in a sign-system, signs are only interpreted through other signs. For instance, in any language the meaning of words and sentences is explained with other words. Barthes (1981: 48) states that this formulation or reproduction of signs, production of language in other words, signification, is a process, rather than a static system.

With its close ties to linguistics, semiotics is quite a suitable tool for language-oriented analyses of texts. For the purposes of the present study, A. J. Greimas's (1979) structural semantics will function as the method for distinguishing and analysing the symbols of femininity in *Armies*. In this approach, the vital elements of analysis are 1) the identification of signs or '**semems**' via binary oppositions and 2) the reduction of redundancy via

similarities of semantic content (Greimas 1979: 28, 31-32, 177). In other words, it will be necessary to note the usage of symbolism connected to women and feminine in *Armies* in relation to their semantic opposites and then reduce the redundant heterogeneity of source material to symbolic representations of semantic content.

It should be noted that while Greimas (1979) aspired ultimately to formulate the structure of an entire language, or even human thought itself with his method, in this essay his structural semantics is applied in a much smaller scale and more modest goals. Greimas (1979: 121-150) would have considered a language a 'semantic universe', in which a corpus for study, for instance the entire life's work of an author, would have constituted a 'micro-universe', in which a single opus would have been an example of the author's idiomatic structure, this itself a necessary product of the semantic structure of the language. Culler (1975: 85, 94-95) considers this goal excessively ambitious, even unattainable, and I concur. However, if we take a single work, or an excerpt from a work, a micro-universe, as the semantic universe in which to conduct a structural semantic analysis, the method becomes, in my opinion, usable. In other words, to consider *Armies* as an (semi-)autonomous linguistic entity enables the analysis to focus on the desired element, in this case the feminine, entirely in its own natural context, in this case *Armies*, and to formulate the semantic structure of this element within its context.

2.2 Kristeva's semanalysis

As a counterpoint to structuralist thinking, I will approach femininity in the present study with methods from poststructuralist school of thought. Mainly I will base my analysis on Julia Kristeva's approach to literary analysis, or semanalysis, which combines psychoanalysis and semiotics. In Kristeva's analysis of poetic language, structural semiotics

would constitute the analysis of only the literal meaning of the text. She calls this surface level of the text **phenotext**, and the main object of her study, the deep structure of the text, **genotext** (Kristeva 1974: 121). According to Nöth (1990: 323), phenotext can be studied with such methods as structural semantics. Genotext, on the other hand, is according to Kristeva (1974: 121), beyond structural linguistics. She (ibid.) claims that the genotext is a process rather than a linguistic object, due to the subconscious drives producing it, and thus articulates ephemeral and non-signifying structures.

To fully comprehend the methods with which the genotext may be studied, it is important to understand the psychoanalytic basis of Kristeva's thinking. She (1974: 98) acknowledges her approach to signification as "inseparable" from Freud's theories of the subconscious. In describing the process of signification, Kristeva (1968: 83) credits Freud's discovery of dream-work, the process of producing signification in dreaming, as a process of permutation of existing material, i.e. (often suppressed) memories and desires. In particular, she (1974: 111) specifies Freud's concepts of **displacement** and **condensation** in dream-work as equivalent to (or indeed, even the same as) metonymy and metaphor in literary analysis.

Freud (1992: 259-263) names displacement the phenomenon of dreams in which events of the previous day or much earlier memories, which may have seemed completely inconsequential while awake, and indeed, have been all but forgotten in the waking hours, are fore-grounded and attached with great moment. He claims that such seemingly insignificant details become to represent those emotions and drives that the super-ego (the socially determined conscience) will censor (suppress). In terms of semiotics, this corresponds to a linguistic feature in which signifiers become to denote signifieds of other signifiers, i.e. signs become intrinsically and unconventionally related. This is also known as metonymy, which is the representation of a concept via a related concept.

Condensation, in Freud's (1992: 238-259) terminology, denotes the dream-work in which a single image becomes the nexus of a multitude of memories and desires and emotions, suppressed and otherwise. In other words, several drives somehow significant to the dreamer's psyche become to determine a single element, and in the process create an entire network of associations with their interactions, all of which can be read from careful (self-) analysis of the dream image. In literary metaphors such multi-determination is often present when the analysis of the metaphor's elements points to several meanings, different connotations and multi-layered literary allusions, all coming together to form a single, evocative poetic image.

To these two points of contact between literary analysis and psychoanalysis Kristeva (1974: 111) adds the process of **intertextuality**. In her parlance, the term refers not to the study of literary allusions, but rather the presence of multiple sign-systems (e.g. scholastic, carnival, speech, poetic) in a single text. In such a process, the position of the signification is shifting, constantly deconstructing and reconstructing the meaning of the text in relation to the various sign-systems present in the text.

It is important to note that Kristeva (1966: 45-47) places much of the process of signification, and thus the process of narration, within the psyche of the reader. In the process of reading/writing the writing subject is formed as a relationship to the reading subject, coded in a way in a dialogue between signifying systems. Both the writing and reading subjects can themselves be seen as dialogues between the formulation of a 'law', the system of signs behind utterances, and the actual utterances themselves. Thus the signification process becomes a matter of permutation similar to one found in psychoanalysis.

We can now explicitly state that which has so far only been hinted at: The relationship between the phenotext and the genotext in literary analysis is equivalent to the one between the super-ego and the subconscious in psychoanalysis. In other words, the communicating level of literal meaning in language functions as a socially constructed element censoring the unstructured flow of subconscious desires that produce meaning in the reading subject. According to Morris (1993: 167), it is this dialectic between the suppressing order and deconstructive subconscious that has made poststructuralist thought so appealing to feminism. It allows a pathway to study the paternal structure within poetic language itself and the binary gender oppositions, which form its basis. Anomalies, or 'ruptures' in the use of language, e.g. ungrammaticalities or logical discrepancies, are glimpses into the subconscious processes that enable signification (Kristeva 1974: 103).

Furthermore, it is clear that any deeper analysis of the text must take into account the subjectivity of such an analysis. The place of associations, intertextuality and interpretation is ultimately the psyche of the reader. The psychoanalytic methods with which the text is studied must thus be based on the subject within analysis. Therefore, as Kirstinä (1988: 8) states, different readers find different ruptures in a given text with which to construct its meaning. This is not to say that interpretations by different readers become wildly incompatible, or that any form of laxness in analysis will be justified by 'subjectivity'. It does, however, cause a requirement for certain introspection from the part of the analyst. In case of a political study such as the present one, it is good practice to attempt an explicit formulation of one's own political views and preconceptions.

3 Present Study

In the present study, it is my attempt to comprehensively analyse the woman and the feminine in Mailer's *Armies*. I combine both structural and poststructural methods of reading in the analysis. As Kristeva (1974: 122) notes, the signifying process is necessarily the sum of phenotext and genotext. Thus, the analysis of both is needed for completeness.

The structural analysis of the depiction of feminine in *Armies* will apply Greimas's structural semantics. This will involve the categorization of symbols of femininity via binary oppositions. Considering Millett's (1977: 314-335) findings concerning Mailer's fictional works, namely the constant drive to define man through his supremacy and dominance of woman, it is expected that this binary opposition will be of the form man/not-man. In other words, I hypothesize that women will be depicted through their relation to men (someone's sister, wife, mother etc.), and the feminine as what is not masculine or is inimical to masculinity.

The method of structural semantics is to gather all instances of the element in study, in this case the woman and the feminine in *Armies*, and to determine its semantic content with identification of the binary oppositions within the 'semems', or, 'meaning particles' of the element. This identification ideally comes from the structuring of the sign-system (language) that is studied, with no need for linguistic ability on the part of analyst. In practice, the analyst will necessarily apply innate knowledge of the sign-system to the analysis, as noted by Culler (1975: 21-24). The semantic content thus derived will then be simplified with reduction of redundant elements, elimination of irrelevant factors and normalization, e.g. transformation of the linguistic information into an objective, logical structure of syntax and basic meanings (Greimas 1979: 168, 169, 175-181). In other words, the analysis aims at

discovering the most basic and simple form of meaning of a given corpus, expressed in terms independent of stylistic or poetic features. The results of the present analysis will be given in general terms, as there is no need for symbolic representation with a study of a single semem.

In studying the genotext of depictions of the woman and the feminine, I will apply Kristeva's semanalysis. The approach emphasizes psychoanalytic reading. Kristeva (1974: 102-104) claims that the signification process in which the subconscious drives submit to social ordering (correct language) may be disrupted in poetic language and, particularly, in writing. Such disruptions consequently allow the observation of the structuring behind signification, and "allows us to presume something about its functioning" (ibid.). In practice this means selecting parts of the text that seem incongruent or inconsistent with the rest. In the case of *Armies*, this might mean elements that do not seem to fit the dominant semantic paradigm, passages with sudden shift in style or register, or breaks in the flow of the text. These selections then will be compared to psychoanalytic theories concerning relevant phenomena of the psyche. In this study I will refer to both Freud's and Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories.

The present study also acknowledges its subjectivity. This is necessary because in semanalysis, as well as in all literary analysis, the text is, according to Kristeva (1966: 45-47, 1974: 97-100), a process of signification only describable as a dialogue within the reading subject. The framework of structural semantics and theories of psychoanalysis will naturally help the reader in establishing a form of objectivity in relation to author's views. I will additionally endeavour to procure an explicit depiction of my views. In relation to this, it should be noted that the present study is openly political: it aims to reveal a misogynistic bias in a work of non-fiction, where one would conventionally expect objectiveness.

4 Woman in *The Armies of the night*

4.1 Structuring of femininity

A conventional structuring of gender is to see the masculine and the feminine as binary opposites, poles of an axis. This structure is, indeed, present in *Armies* as well. It can be seen in three modes. Firstly, in the roughly one hundred instances in which women or femininity are discussed (or rather, in most cases, mentioned) in *Armies*, there are none in which this is not done in relation to men or masculinity. The woman always interacts with men, either directly as an object of male action, as demanding something from men, as intermediaries between men, or (as a symbol of the feminine) as an attribute of masculine behaviour. In other words, whenever something female is present in the text, it evokes comparison with something (or everything) male. Most often we find this expressed quite directly.

Women function as objects of desire, as in where[2] narrator-protagonist Mailer lusts after a waitress, described as "a goddess of a bucket for a one-night stand" (p. 98) or when he mentions "Some reasonably attractive wives to be certain, and a couple of young girls, too young for him" (p. 25). Other instances of desire include women described on the basis of their attractiveness or entertainment value, and women as possessions (his wife, his sister etc.) Women are also the objects of violence in several cases, the most vivid of them being perhaps the depiction of the battering of a female protestor at the hands of Marshals (p.307). When not functioning as simple objects, women ask or demand something from men, or otherwise provoke male action, for instance girls revealing their breasts to taunt soldiers. As

[2] All the following Mailer quotes/references are from *The Armies of The Night* (Mailer 1968). I will refer to the novel by page number only.

intermediaries, women carry the messages of men, these being actual linguistic messages, or, regarding the beatings of female protestors (p.308), unvocalized messages (in this case, Mailer theorizes that women were beaten in order to shame male protestors).

Secondly, Mailer uses the genders as opposite poles of an axis rather explicitly. This is done for instance when the diversity of the anti-war protesters is described as "an army of both sexes... of all ages... some were well-dressed, some were poor..." (p.108). It is apparent that Mailer describes the protesters here as encompassing the both ends of several social axes: age, wealth, gender, thus also positing that gender indeed is a polar axis.

Thirdly, the very structure of masculinity in *Armies* demands the feminine to be its opposite. This structure is somewhat complex to render explicit, as it seems to combine sex and violence into a single act of desire. We have already seen how women often function as direct objects of male sexual desire or violence. Mailer combines these scatologically with his insistence on obscenity. War is either obscene or droll (p. 208) as is, in almost exactly the same formulation, sex (p. 36). Also, Mailer posits that a very basic freedom for him is the ability to apply obscenity in his texts (p. 38). It is a liberty to search for truth of the soul, as is sex (p.47-48). We can thus notice that sex and violence are intertwined expressions of a basic male desire and the tools of forming masculinity. The masculine is determined by man's ability to fulfil his desire. For example Mailer describes a frustration of his: "Sometimes he thought his relation to his image was not unlike some poor fellow who strains his very testicles to bring in emoluments for his wife yet is never favored with carnal knowledge of her" (p.16). We notice that the feminine has thus either a positive or negative aspect: Either hindering male self-determination (denying desire) or advancing it (by surrendering to male desire).

We can thus see that gender is structured in *Armies* as a male/female binary opposition. It should also be noted that the feminine never acts alone, as a positive function in itself, nor as an interaction between women. The masculine is therefore the primary aspect of gender and the feminine represents the other, the non-male.

In summary, we find that women in *Armies* can be semantically categorized as follows. As objects of (male) action, they are victims, possessions, targets of desire, entertainment. We may also note that these roles are only variations of the basic semem 'the object of male action' due to the structuring of the masculine/feminine. Furthermore, while women can be seen in the syntactic role of subject, this syntactic role does not determine a corresponding semantic role as an autonomous subject. As syntactic subjects, women function as observers (of male action), provoking male action or as intermediaries between males. In other words, the semantic function of women still reads as a determinant or attribute of the masculine. Thus the woman in *Armies* is semantically the territory/object of masculine self-determination, desire, which manifests as a combinatory act of sex/violence.

4.2 Reading the unwritten

Structural semantics clearly shows the systematic objectification of the woman in *Armies*, in which femininity is reduced to mere means for performing masculinity. I will now study this phenomenon with Kristeva's semanalysis, which attempts to discover the subconscious processes in the signification of the text. It should be explicated that the approach does not attempt to analyse the author himself, nor does it consider the text under analysis to be in any way a personality with its own subconscious. Rather, the structures of *Armies*, which represent the signification processes of writing, will be compared to findings of psychoanalysis on the functions of human psyche to discover parallels of form. In other

words, we are not interested here in psychological development but in the possibility of discovering the primal processes behind the social ordering, the superego if you will, of the text.

A necessary prerequisite for semanalysis is an entry-point, a rupture in the text. An intriguing candidate for such a rupture would be the whole semantic structure of femininity in *Armies*. This structure, after all, violates 'regular' semantic rules of language in stripping away autonomous subjectivity from women depicted in the book and in connecting sex and violence, with quite different semantic contents, as expressions of male desire. The former of these violations manifests often syntactically, as in Mailer´s opinion on political womanhood: "But for a woman to think of herself politically as a Mother, or worse, a Woman, could only indulge a sense of self-pity"(p. 113). Here even the act of female autonomous thinking is apparently seen so anathematic that it must be hidden as a hypothesis in a non-finite clause.

The structure of sex and violence as different faces of the singular male desire, which acts as the core of masculinity, is the one Millett (1977: 314-335) discovered in her analysis of Mailer's works as well: "As sex is war, war is sexual" (ibid.: 316). She does not, however, delve into the psychology of the issue, probably due to resentment towards psychoanalytic interpretation. In fact, while commenting on the paradoxical nature of Mailer's anti-war position, she equates Mailer's attitudes towards war to what she calls "the popular Freudian formula: observe, codify, sanction and prescribe" (Millett 1977: 314, 322). Psychoanalytic approach may, however, greatly elucidate this apparent paradox between Mailer's anti-war position and his expressed enthusiasm for warrior masculinity may.

The entire semantic structure of femininity in *Armies* may however prove to be too big and unwieldy as an entry-point for this approach, especially when we can find a rupture within the structure. This rupture is a very special kind of woman: the mother. Generally in *Armies*, a woman is seen in a positive light, if she in some way feeds the male desire. With mother, this pattern is reversed. Narrator-protagonist Mailer describes a "personality he found absolutely insupportable" thus: "he had the softness of a man early accustomed to mother-love" (p.153). Here we see clearly that in case of mother, actualised desire is detrimental. It is safe to assume that the underlying proximate reason for this is the violation of the incest taboo, but the fact that the mother becomes thus highlighted can direct us towards certain phases in psychosexual development: the Oedipus complex and castration anxieties.

Freud (1971: 151, 180-182, 193-199) postulates that a young boy will undergo in his sexual development a phase in which he will be sexually attracted towards his mother, consider his father a rival and subsequently develop the notion he may be castrated as a punishment for his desires. The castration anxieties in his theory are seen as both a way of developing sexuality directed towards non-family and as a way to separate oneself from the mother, which manifests as fear-driven hostility. Freud (ibid.) also notes that the infant will likewise display bisexual tendencies towards the father, which will be repressed in the same way. Mitchell (1974: 88-89, 96, 396-397) notes that the phallus, which is essential to Freud's theory of psychosexual development, is actually a representation of larger and more abstract issues, mainly power, which the infant lacks. In addition, Kristeva claims (1974: 103-105) the Oedipus complex and the resulting castration anxieties enable the distinguishing of the other from self: an indispensable prerequisite for signification process.

I believe that in this formulation of the Oedipal phase we have the crux of the matter that is the woman in *Armies*. The woman, as seen in the book, is fixed as the object of desire, which

is compromised by fear of retribution. Man must prove his supremacy by seducing, dominating and punishing the woman, these actions melded together in Mailer's language full of terminology from warfare. As Millett (1977: 327) notes, "the conquest is not only over the female, but over the male's own fears for his masculinity, his courage, his dominance, the test of erection."

The anxiety of castration is not over the physical phallus, but the power, the male dominance, it represents. Women must thus be portrayed as passive, weak and subjugated, as victims and possessions, completely objectified on the level of language. Their autonomy would threaten the very core of masculinity. This threat then triggers the violence so endemic to Mailer's notion of desire, which becomes the epitome of masculine behaviour. In Freudian terms, the act of sexual desire is transferred to violence. Violence becomes a displacement for sex.

At the same time the severity of female put-down in *Armies* reveals the power which femininity, especially mother, holds in this interpretation. As could be suggested from Kristeva's (1974: 103-105) postulations on the significance of the Oedipal phase in signification, the text of the *Armies* is locked in the castration anxieties. The extent of this may be seen in the fact that while positive masculinity, in fact the very act of being male, is seen in terms of warfare, narrator-protagonist Mailer has taken an anti-war position towards the war in Vietnam. This seeming paradox becomes clear when one considers that America in *Armies* is a mother: "She is America… now heavy with child" (p. 320). If war is sex, then America in war is a mother having sex, a clear violation of the incest taboo. Thus the anti-war position of *Armies* is explained through the castration anxieties displayed therein.

5 Conclusions

The analysis of the woman and the feminine in *The Armies of the Night* reveals a clear and systematic misogynistic bias in the portrayal of women. This bias follows closely the observations Millett (1977) made in her analysis of Mailer's works. Specifically, it seems that *Armies* displays an infantile disposition towards women described by Freud (1971) in his theories of sexual development. This infantile attitude manifests as the need on the textual level to dismiss and objectify women in order to provide scaffolding for patriarchal dominance. Furthermore, the objectivity of Mailer's reporting in this work of non-fiction is severely compromised by this bias.

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