The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History Study Guide

The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History by Norman Mailer

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Well-known writer Norman Mailer receives a phone call from an old acquaintance, Mitchell Goodman. Mitchell Goodman has become involved in the anti-war movement and is calling to request Mailer's support and presence at the March on the Pentagon. Mailer is annoyed at the interruption and unsure of how he feels about the protest, but he decides to leave New York and travel to Washington for the March.

At the March, Mailer meets up with many notable acquaintances, such as the poet Robert Lowell, critic Dwight Macdonald, parenting expert Dr. Spock, and linguist Noam Chomsky. On Thursday night, Mailer goes to a cocktail party before acting as Master of Ceremonies at an event at the Ambassador Theater. He drinks too much that night and wakes up Friday morning hungover.

On Friday, Mailer, Lowell, and Macdonald go to a meeting on a church lawn in Washington where young men have gathered to turn in their draft cards. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., chaplain at Yale, heads the walk over to the Department of Justice where 994 draft cards will be turned in to the government. There are many speeches and statements by the young men before Coffin goes into the Department of Justice. He returns some time later with the bag of draft cards; they have not been accepted by the authorities.

Saturday morning is the day of the March, and tens of thousands of people descend on the Washington Monument where they meet before walking to the Pentagon. Seeing the Lincoln Memorial and watching all the people gather to protest makes Mailer think of the Civil War and what it feels like to go into battle. He walks along with everyone else to the Pentagon and decides along the way that it is his duty to get arrested.

He crosses a military line to get arrested and is taken in a Volkswagen to a post office where he is held for several hours. In the Volkswagen on the way to the post office, Mailer gets into an altercation with a young blond man who wears a Nazi armband. An MP has to step in and get the men to calm down. He waits for several hours at the post office, hoping that he'll be let out in time to catch a plane back to New York because there's a party that night he wants to go to.

He is then taken to Occaquan, Virginia, where he spends the night in a jail before getting to see a judge. The judge gives him a harsher sentence than other protesters because he is older and more influential and should be a better example to young people, but the sentence is then shortened and he makes it back to New York by Sunday night.

The second half of the book is a history of the event, starting many months before the March with the planning process. The history covers the role of the media, the response by LBJ, the state of the liberal faction in America, and a harrowing conclusion regarding the future of American politics.

Part I, Chapters 1-4

Part I, Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the author Norman Mailer, written in the form of a Time Magazine article from October 27, 1967. In the article, Mailer gets arrested for crossing a police line, apparently intoxicated. The scene seems chaotic, and the chapter ends by inviting the reader to read on in order to find out what happened.

Chapter 2 takes place in Mailer's den. The telephone rings, and Mailer debates at length about whether or not to pick it up. Although he detests the telephone, he deigns to pick it up once in a while. The caller is an author by the name of Mitchell Goodman. Goodman and Mailer have known each other for a long time. They grew up in the same area, graduated from Harvard at about the same time, and even spent time together in Paris during World War II.

Goodman asks Mailer to attend the demonstration at the Department of Justice when the draft cards are turned in. They have a reciprocal relationship. Mailer wrote a blurb for Goodman's book in the past and they have helped each other in political endeavors, so Mailer feels compelled to go along with Goodman's idea. He agrees to be present for the demonstration at the Department of Justice.

Chapter 3 begins on Thursday afternoon when Mailer is on a plane headed to Washington, D.C. By this time he knows that there will be a program at a theater and that he will be speaking at the program, along with Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, and Paul Goodman. Dwight Macdonald is on the same plane with Mailer, and they meet up with Ed de Grazia, who is to be the M.C. of the program at the theater.

Chapter 4 covers a party Thursday evening at the home of an attractive liberal couple. Mailer ruminates over the qualities and personality of liberal parties. He dislikes parties such as this, but he enjoys drinking, and he drinks too much. After flirting with several women and lying to the hostess, Mailer finds himself in conversation with Robert Lowell. Lowell flatters Mailer, and Mailer admits that he thinks highly of Lowell. Then Mailer speaks with Macdonald, but this conversation is awkward because Macdonald is currently in the process of reviewing Mailer's newest book for the New Yorker, and they feel that they shouldn't be speaking to one another. Toward the end of the party, the speakers for the meeting talk about their plan, and Mailer usurps the M.C. position, leaving de Grazia annoyed.

Mailer's personality becomes very obvious in this first part. He is overly confident and delights in the discomfort of others. He is a deep thinker and frequently deviates from the narration to interject his opinions or random thoughts. At times his thoughts make no sense, and it's clear that the drug culture of the 1960s is at least an indirect influence in these ramblings.

Part I, Chapters 5-6

Part I, Chapters 5-6 Summary and Analysis

The party breaks up, and Mailer walks with his cohorts to The Ambassador, a theater two blocks away. The audience has been waiting for them for nearly an hour, being entertained by a folk music group. Although he is Master of Ceremonies, Mailer knows that he must find a bathroom before he gets on stage. The bathroom is upstairs, and when he gets there, he can't find a light switch and ends up urinating on the floor.

When he gets to the stage, he finds that de Grazia is performing as M.C., so he picks his way through people sitting in the front of the theater, climbs up onto the stage, and slaps de Grazia on the rear end, creating no small scene. He takes a knee and listens while Paul Goodman reads poetry. The sound system is terrible, and he can hardly hear what Goodman is saying. He whispers to de Grazia that he's going to take over as M.C. when Goodman is finished. The men squabble in whispers and Macdonald tries to get them to quiet down.

Mailer takes over as M.C. and behaves like a drunken sailor. He uses profanity and doesn't make any sense. He is raucous and loud. He uses false voices and outrageous body language. The men on stage with him do not appear to be amused by all this. The program continues in Chapter 6, and Robert Lowell takes the stage. His voice is quiet, and someone in the audience says that they can't hear him. When Lowell begins reciting his poetry, Mailer finds that he is jealous of Lowell because the audience seems to be so enamored with him. The audience gives Lowell a standing ovation.

When Mailer has the microphone back, he tells the story of how he had to go to the bathroom before the show began and there were no lights and he urinated on the floor. He gets louder and more out of control. He uses profanity more liberally. By the time it is over, the applause is fair but there is certainly no standing ovation for Norman Mailer. He goes back to the hotel and sleeps.

The action in Chapters 5 and 6 develops Mailer's character more fully and sets him up for an interesting weekend. In order to make up for perceived shortcomings, Mailer pulls out all the stops and does anything outrageous. The audience responds more appreciatively to Lowell's modest poetry reading than to all of Mailer's burlesque, and this humbles Mailer more than anything else could.

Part II, Chapters 1-4

Part II, Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

Part II is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 pulls back from the immediate action and serves as another preface to the march on the Pentagon, much like the first chapter of the book. This chapter is written from the vantage point of hindsight. Mailer claims that the march on the Pentagon was an ambiguous event and that its place in history will not be known for ten or twenty years, if ever.

Chapter 2 returns the reader to the intimate details of Mailer's experience over this weekend. He now has a hangover. He uses a metaphor to describe his hangover. It has ravaged his brain as napalm ravages a countryside. He makes himself get up and then meets some friends and acquaintances in the dining room. At breakfast, the group talks about the plans for the day. They are going to meet at the Department of Justice and turn in a sack full of draft cards.

The action continues in Chapter 3 when the group goes to a church after breakfast. There is a meeting on the lawn of the church, and thirty to forty young men have convened to represent those whose draft cards will be turned in at the Department of Justice. As the young men organize themselves and pass around a loaf of white bread and peanut butter, Mailer stands to the side with other men of his generation. He strikes up a conversation with Dwight Macdonald and Robert Lowell, and then Mitch Goodman opens up an informal meeting with a portable microphone.

William Sloane Coffin then took the microphone and explained the route to the Department of Justice and gave instructions. Bill Coffin is the chaplain at Yale, and the older men are impressed with him. They all walk to the Department of Justice and then Bill Coffin gives a speech, which reminds Mailer of sermons given by New England ministers. Then Mitch Goodman and Dr. Spock give speeches, and Robert Lowell and Norman Mailer are called up to give a few remarks. This time, Mailer behaves. After this, young men come up to the microphone one by one to explain why they're turning in their draft cards. In all, there are 994 draft cards that will be turned in. Coffin takes the draft cards in but returns shortly thereafter and explains that the draft cards have not been accepted. The meeting disperses, and Lowell, Mailer, and Macdonald go to a bar.

Part III, Chapters 1-3

Part III, Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 1, Mailer, Macdonald, and Lowell meet at the Hay-Adams for breakfast where there is a feeling of a class reunion. They see many well-dressed acquaintances and there is a celebratory feeling in the air. Mailer and Lowell keep complimenting each other on their speeches, which comes across as funny in the writing, but it shows that their friendship is deepening.

Mailer expounds on the differences between the current generation of Americans and their forbears. They believe in technology more than any previous generation, but they also believe in witches and tribal knowledge. They hate the authority that has had such an impression on their brains and development, especially in the forms of media and television. They love revolution.

Chapter 2 begins with a stroll from the hotel to the Washington Monument. Mailer feels as if he is going to battle, and he reminisces about the first time he went into battle during World War II. He remembers that moment as if it were the most agreeable moment of his life, and yet it was filled with terror. He feels an echo of that feeling now. This time, however, the troops look very different. They are gathering from all directions, and they are wearing strange costumes, everything from Sergeant Pepper's suits to Turkish shepherds and Eisenhower jackets.

In Chapter 3 Mailer resolves to get arrested during the march. He believes that he must lend his name to the cause, and he thinks that getting arrested will get his name in the papers and inspire the younger generation to continue to protest the war in Vietnam. There are many speeches before the March begins, and everyone seems to be getting weary of listening to the endless speeches. Mailer pays attention, though, because he doesn't want to miss anything good. He was present at the Civil Rights March in Washington in 1963 and missed Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech because he had walked away for a few minutes when he was tired.

Someone asks Lowell, Macdonald, and Mailer to get to the front row of the march where they will be front and center for the newsreels. The ranks are being formed. All through this section of the book, Mailer uses military imagery to convey to readers the feeling of the March on the Pentagon. He uses words phrases like "rallying trumpet," "troops," and "Left wing war" to develop a military atmosphere. The costumes worn by the protesters make a striking contrast to all this military imagery, creating an almost psychedelic scene.

Part III, Chapters 4-6

Part III, Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 begins with suspense. It has been a long wait, but the March is finally about to begin. Mailer, writing in the third person, calls Macdonald, Lowell, and himself the Critic, the Poet, and the Novelist, respectively. The television crews are in place, and the people start to form ranks. They push and compress into a mass of people and individuals grow irritable. They've been waiting through hours of boring speeches, and now that they believe the March is finally going to begin, they push each other impatiently.

One young black man gets terribly impatient and starts yelling and wanting everyone to move. A professor by the name of Donald Kalish tells the young man to go talk to one of the monitors. It probably doesn't solve the young man's problem, but it gets the irate boy out of the way. The mass begins to move very slowly. There are helicopters flying overhead, loudspeakers blaring, and cars slowly driving alongside the marchers. People hold signs in the air while television cameras haggle for the best shots.

By the time the marchers get to Chapter 5, they've made it to the Pentagon parking lot, which is about as big as five football fields. Mailer knows that his function at this march is to get arrested, and he wants to do it quickly so he can get back on an airplane to New York and make it back in time for a party that night. He impatiently tries to figure out the best way to get arrested.

There is a music group called the Fugs playing folk music at one end of the parking lot. They are dressed in strange costumes and they begin to perform some sort of exorcism. Someone passes out a mimeographed paper explaining the exorcism and then some chanting begins. Mailer is interested in the chanting at first, but it gets old quickly because it is so repetitive. Lowell, on the other hand, is enthralled with the chanting. Mailer figures that it must strike some chord in his poetic soul. Soon, it appears that some people are fleeing, but it is unclear what they're running from. Mailer thinks this will be the best time to get arrested, so he moves toward a rope line and beckons for Lowell and Macdonald to follow.

Chapter 6 begins when Mailer steps over the low rope and walks toward the MPs. The MP in front of him is a young black man who looks very nervous. The MP tells Mailer to go back, but Mailer says he wants to be arrested. The MP tells him to go back again, and Mailer refuses. The MP raises his club, and Mailer sees that the young man's hand is trembling. Finally, the MP takes him by the shoulder and arrests him.

There is a lot of tension in these chapters. All of the action up to this point has pointed toward the March, and when it finally arrives it moves agonizingly slowly. Mailer's desire for it to come quickly so that he can go back to New York for a party that night does nothing to reduce the tension. The end of this chapter marks a climax in the plot, but it

still contains a great deal of suspense because we don't know what Mailer will encounter after he is arrested.

Part IV, Chapters 1-5

Part IV, Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

Mailer begins the first chapter by teasing the reader with an old Victorian method of introducing a digression at the pinnacle of the climax to add suspense. He tells about a British documentary filmmaker named Dick Fontaine who has used Mailer as a subject of his films in the past. Fontaine has also recently asked Mailer if he could film him during the March on the Pentagon, which Mailer agreed to under certain terms. Therefore, when Mailer crosses the rope line, Dick Fontaine is behind him with the camera rolling. A reporter darts up to Mailer and asks on camera why he was arrested. Mailer says that he transgressed a police line and that the arrest was done correctly. After this, he walks with the MP along a river. The MP's hand lightens up on Mailer's arm, and Mailer uses his novelist's eye to examine the young man, whom he describes as having an intelligent, clean-featured American face.

Chapter 2 finds Mailer in a Volkswagen with other arrestees from the March. Mailer has kept his eyes open for Lowell and Macdonald but has seen no sign of them. He wonders if they followed him across the rope line. The Volkswagen often stops for more arrestees. The group soon includes Mailer, a young blonde man with a Nazi armband, a man named Walter Teague, and a tall Hungarian who says he's a Freedom Fighter. The Nazi and Mailer stare each other down, and Mailer wins the staring contest. The Nazi calls Mailer a "dirty Jew with kinky hair," and Mailer calls him a "Kraut Pig," but then finds out that he's Norwegian. They argue back and forth until the Marshal in the Volkswagen throws the Nazi up against the wall.

In Chapter 3, Mailer is taken from the Volkswagen into a detaining room where all of the arrestees are being brought. The MP who has been in charge of him is extremely polite, and they have a pleasant conversation about West Virginia. Mailer soon discovers that there are all kinds of people in the room from Yale chaplains and druggies to Nazis and grandmas with orange hair. There are enough people to fill hundreds of novels with outstanding characters. The Yale chaplain, John Boyle, has been arrested nine times. He tells Mailer that they will probably be some of the first ones out.

In Chapter 4, Mailer boards a bus and is driven to the United States Post Office in Alexandria, along with a busload of other arrestees. He describes the mood on the bus as a high school team riding a school bus home from a victory. The MPs are like substitute teachers trying to keep unruly students in line but knowing that they don't have much authority. On the way to the post office, Mailer thinks about a parallel between the Pentagon and the ancient Egyptian pyramids. Egyptian money ended up on the banks of the Nile in the form of the pyramids, and American money is piled up in the Pentagon on the banks of the Potomac.

Chapter 5 is the longest chapter in this section, partly because Mailer spends so much space thinking about America, his wives and children, Southerners, and soldiers. The

arrestees are to be booked at the post office, and they are put into cells during this process. Walter Teague, who Mailer met on the Volkswagen, goes to sleep in the cell. Mailer plays chess with a younger man with a chess board and pieces made out of torn-up paper.

Mailer calls his wife. She is an American blonde to whom he has been married for four years. She is his fourth wife and he thinks of all the other cultures he has been exposed to because of his four wives. He also thinks about his four daughters and two sons. He worries more about his sons because he thinks they are more fragile and that his mistakes with them will cause more harm in the long run.

A young Civil Liberties Union lawyer comes to make sure that everyone's rights are being respected, but he doesn't have any information for them. Finally, the arrestees are loaded on a bus and taken to Occoquan for booking. Mailer gives up any hope of getting back to New York in time for the party. Dick Fontaine and his camera crew are waiting outside for Mailer. They talk with him and get some footage, and Mailer is very glad to see them.

Part IV, Chapters 6-11

Part IV, Chapters 6-11 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 6, the prisoners are taken via bus to Occaquan, Virginia, where they are processed and then sent to large rooms filled with bunk beds. Rumors make the rounds about whether or not the commissioners will be able to process them or whether they'll have to spend the night there. Mailer sees Walter Teague on a bunk bed teaching his Leninism to a group of fifteen men who have gathered around the bunk to listen. Mailer sees many of his Greenwich Village acquaintances and settles down on a bunk next to the bunk of Noam Chomsky, famed linguist of MIT.

In Chapter 7, Mailer discusses the war in Vietnam. He takes the arguments posed by supporters and protesters and tries to examine each argument. He calls the supporters "Hawks" and the protesters "Doves." He says that the Doves are divided because some of them secretly want Asia to go communist because they themselves have communist views and others are pacifists and don't believe in war. Other Doves are not pacifists in every case but feel the Vietnam War is an unjust war. In the end, he says, "the good Christian Americans needed the war or they would lose their Christ," meaning that the war supports commercialism and technology, their true gods.

In Chapter 8, Mailer wakes up on Sunday morning feeling dirty and tired, but he doesn't want to miss breakfast because breakfast is one of the biggest events of the day in prison. He spends most of Sunday talking with other prisoners. Teague begins lecturing at 8 o'clock in the morning and talks most of the day. Later in the day, Mailer realizes that he has been writing a draft of a letter to send to a newspaper, but Mailer doesn't like it because it's divisive. A group of younger men want Mailer to talk with them because he's a famous writer, a substitute for Hemingway. When Mailer is called up to go to court, he puts on his vest, tie, and cuff links and tries to make himself as presentable as possible. He's informed that his lawyer is wearing sneakers.

Chapter 9 begins with Mailer finding out who his lawyer is: it's de Grazia. De Grazia inform him that sentences are all pretty much the same, but he doesn't want Mailer to plead guilty because he doesn't want his case to get more attention than is necessary. He wants him to plead "no contest." In the end, Mailer pleads "no contest," but the judge gives him a heavier sentence than average because he is a mature, well-known man who should be setting a better example for young people. He must pay $50 and spend five days in jail. The five days sound endless to Mailer. De Grazia requests the help of an attorney named Mr. Hirschkop. The Commissioner lets him out on $500 bail on his own recognizance.

Chapters 10 and 11 are quite short. Mailer gets out of jail and speaks to reporters on the lawn. Mailer gives a speech with religious overtones and then rides back to Washington in de Grazia's car. He changes at the hotel and then flies back to New York. The write-

up in the paper about his arrest and speech on the lawn is about as bad as he expects it to be.

Book II, Chapters 1-6

Book II, Chapters 1-6 Summary and Analysis

The first chapter in Book II explains that the novelist is passing the baton to the historian. Book II marks a change in tone and voice. The tone is more serious and analytical, and the voice is more distant than in the first half of the book. The second chapter explains the beginnings of the March. Dellinger, who was mentioned in the first half of the book, gets Jerry Rubin of Berkeley to act as Project Manager for the March. Extensive preparations went into organizing the march. Details such as which side of the Pentagon to approach first required visits to the Pentagon and extensive discussion.

Chapter 3 talks about the Steering Committee of the March, which met in New York. The Steering Committee had to decide which groups should be involved in the coalition. These groups helped to support the costs of the March, which totaled about $65,000. A press conference was held in August to announce the March, which would not be held until October. The stated goal was to shut down the Pentagon in an effort to close the war-making machine of America.

Chapter 4 discusses the Mobilization Committee, which held meetings with Van Cleve, the attorney for the General Services Administration. Van Cleve tells the Mobilization Committee that the protesters may have a rally at the Lincoln Memorial, a march to the North Parking Area of the Pentagon, and a rally in the parking lot. Over several meetings, the two sides debate small details about the March and rallies. Rubin and Dellinger don't see eye to eye on everything, and tensions between these two men grow.

In Chapter 5, the author reviews some of the newspaper articles about the March. The New York Times calculates the number of participants at 50,000. Other estimates put the number at 200,000. The author analyzes the different estimates and then talks about some of the major groups involved in the March. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Revolutionary Contingent held a militant attitude rather than a completely peaceful attitude. However, during the March, the SDS wants to hold their ground by sitting down and not moving while the Revolutionary Contingent wanted to actively push the MPs' line and force their way toward the Pentagon. In hindsight, the author says that the groups assembled too soon and attacked too soon.

Chapter 6 talks about how people felt during the March. There was terror on both sides of the military lines. It was obvious that the MPs were terrified by the task of maintaining order with such a huge and unruly group, and the protesters were afraid of being clubbed or hurt. The author compares and contrast two newspaper articles in this chapter, one article by Breslin and the other by Gerald Long. From the two articles, the author concludes that a fair account of the March on the Pentagon will never be written.

Although the tone has changed drastically from the first half of the book, the writing in Book II is still very readable. It is more journalistic, quotes others more faithfully, and leaves out the musings of the narrator. Nonetheless, the author still employs novelistic tools, especially at the end of Chapter 6 when he uses the withheld fate of Macdonald and Lowell to urge the reader forward.

Book II, Chapters 7-11

Book II, Chapters 7-11 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 tells the reader what happened to Lowell and Macdonald after Mailer was arrested. After they were turned back by the MPs, they walked down to the speakers' rally and stayed there for the rest of the speeches. Dellinger and all the other notables, including Lowell and Macdonald, involved themselves in a teach-in to teach some of the soldiers about peace. Some of the protesters panicked and began to flee. Many people were arrested. Lowell and Macdonald were not arrested but Dellinger was. He managed to be out of prison by the evening and was present at a press conference where he claimed that the March was a victory.

Chapter 8 chronicles the rest of Saturday night. After dark, many protesters stay on the lawn and around the area. They build fires and sit around them smoking pot, making out, and spray painting messages like "War Sucks." The protesters taunt the soldiers, and occasionally arrests are made. Mailer mentions that the brutality of the soldiers is fiercer against women than against men, and he quotes articles from several newspapers to back up this claim.

Chapters 9-11 discuss the end of the March. By late on Saturday night, there are still a few protesters on the lawn. A voice comes over the loudspeaker informing the protesters that their license to hold a protest expires at midnight and that anyone still on Pentagon property will be arrested after midnight. There will be buses provided to take protesters to the mall. The protesters chant and sing and say they won't leave, though busloads full of protesters are leaving the area. Six vans and two panel trucks are loaded up with protesters to be taken to Occaquan, and the March is over. When all is said and done, there are 1,000 arrests. Overall, the press is antagonistic toward the March, LBJ responded favorably to it. The last chapter is very short and praises America the power in its people.

Although the results and responses to the March are mixed, the author feels optimistic about it. He loves to see America's political process. The last chapter has a slightly different tone from all the rest of the book. It reads more like a song of praise than a traditional summary to either a novel or a history. It is a surprising conclusion from a surprising narrator.

Characters

Norman Mailer

Norman Mailer is the main character and author of the book. He is a Jewish American who grew up in New York and served in World War II. He is 44 years old at the time of the March on the Pentagon, and already he is a famous enough author that his name is readily recognizable to most people he meets. He has four daughters and two sons, split up among his four wives.

Mailer describes himself as an egomaniac, and his opinions in the book support this view. He feels that no president or presidential candidate, with the possible exception of John F. Kennedy, has been as able to execute the office of President of the United States as he himself. Despite his self-proclaimed egocentric nature, he expresses many opinions that come across as humble.

At the beginning of the book, Mailer is unsure about what he thinks about the Vietnam War, but within a day or so he decides that it is his duty to be arrested at the March of the Pentagon to lend his name to the cause. This leads the reader to believe that he is passionate by nature, but it may not matter so much what he lends his passion to.

Mitchell Goodman

Mitchell Goodman is a contemporary of Mailer's. The two are both from Brooklyn, married young, went to Harvard, and served in World War II. Mitch Goodman is the character who initially gets Norman Mailer involved with the Vietnam War protest at the Pentagon. He calls Mailer on the phone and asks him to attend the demonstration at the Department of Justice when the draft cards are turned in. Mitchell Goodman is a serious man, somewhat gloomy, and Mailer is irritated by Goodman's clear conscience.

When Norman Mailer is late to the Ambassador Theater on Thursday night, Mitchell Goodman takes the role of M.C. Mailer is upset by this because he was going to be the M.C., so he walks up onto the stage and takes the microphone from Goodman. Goodman, of course, doesn't like this behavior, but he takes it in stride.

Robert Lowell

Robert Lowell is a well-known poet about the same age as Norman Mailer. Lowell is rather quiet and has a dignified reputation. However, he comes across as insecure in his interactions with Mailer. He trusts Mailer and seeks his good opinion. As the weekend develops, their friendship deepens, and their friendship is based mainly on their positive confirmation of each other's writing.

Lowell is right behind Mailer when Mailer gets arrested at the Pentagon, but Lowell somehow escapes arrest. It is clear from Mailer's comment that the friendship between Lowell and Mailer continues for many years after this extended weekend in which they fight for a common cause. Lowell is the man standing just to the left of Mailer on the cover of the book.

Ed de Grazia

Ed de Grazia is originally intended to be the M.C. of the program before Norman Mailer usurps the M.C. role. Ed de Grazi is slim and good looking, a Sicilian. He looks like a younger Frank Sinatra. De Grazia does much of the work of organizing the march, and others trust him and look to him for guidance. He is well-loved by the younger women at the liberal party on Thursday night.

Dwight Macdonald

Macdonald is a fellow writer, though he is older than Norman Mailer. Macdonald has been influential in Mailer's writing life. Although Macdonald never seems to want to interact with Mailer, when they run into each other at a party, they find that they have a good time together. Mailer is very fond of Macdonald, and looks forward to seeing him. At the party on Thursday night, however, they feel awkward together because Macdonald is reviewing Mailer's newest novel for the New Yorker, and they feel that they shouldn't be talking. Macdonald speaks at the meeting on Friday and he is not pleased with the way Mailer conducts himself as M.C.

Harris

Harris is a young black man who stands out at the meeting on the church lawn before the protest at the Department of Justice. Harris seems to be the leader of this group of students. Mailer notices that Harris has style, confidence, and panache.

William Sloane Coffin, Jr.

William Sloane Coffin, Jr., is the chaplain at Yale who leads the march to the Department of Justice to turn in 994 draft cards. Not only does he organize the march, but he also speaks at it and goes in to deliver the cards. He is well-bred and well-spoken, and everyone respects him.

Donald Kalish

Readers are introduced to Donald Kalish at the March on the Pentagon. Donald Kalish is a professor who helps pacify one of the impatient young men who gets distressed as

everyone impatiently waits for the March to begin. Mailer is impressed with his ability to diffuse a hostile situation.

Dick Fontaine

Dick Fontaine is a British documentary filmmaker who has previously included Mailer in some of his films. Previous to the March, Fontaine asked Mailer if he could follow him around the March and take some footage of him for a film he is going to be showing in England. Fontaine follows Mailer through the entire ordeal, and his friendly face is a balm for Mailer several times.

Walter Teague

Mailer first meets Walter Teague when the two are put into the Volkswagen shortly after their arrests at the Pentagon. Walter Teague wears a white motorcycle helmet and seems accustomed to getting arrested. When they get to the post office where they are detained, Walter Teague immediately lies down and goes to sleep.

Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky is a well-known linguist, and Mailer runs into Chomsky at Occoquan where he is being detained for the night. Chomsky is barely thirty years old, but he is considered a genius at MIT. The two men have such pleasant conversations that Mailer thinks they could be cell mates for months, but Chomsky is determined to get back to his classes by Monday morning.

Jerry Rubin

Jerry Rubin is from Berkeley, and he is called in by Dellinger to be the Project Manager of the March on the Pentagon. Dellinger is not portrayed in the novel portion of the book, but he is mentioned in the history portion as instrumental to the March's success.

Objects/Places

Mailer's Den

The second chapter takes place in Mailer's den before he goes to Washington, D.C. In his den, Mailer is completely in control of his life. He can decide whether or not he wants to speak with someone when the phone rings, and his work and life are at his command. His den represents his control over the world. When he leaves his den, he is at the mercy of others to some extent.

The Ambassador

The Ambassador is the theater where the speaking program is held on Thursday night. This is the program where Mailer misses his debut as M.C. but climbs up onto the stage to retake his position.

Draft Cards

At the march to the Department of Justice, the protesters gather 994 draft cards to turn in. The draft cards are not accepted by the Department of Justice, but they represent rebellion against the war.

Washington Monument

On the morning of the march, Mailer and Lowell stroll along the Washington Monument as the protesters gather. Mailer has been to the Washington Monument many times before for political events, and he tries to estimate the number of people present by comparing past gatherings to the current one.

Lincoln Memorial

Mailer and Lowell walk by the Lincoln Memorial a couple of times before the march begins. Seeing the Lincoln Memorial reminds Mailer of the Civil War, and he imagines trumpets blaring and Civil War soldiers gathering for battle as the groups of protesters arrive.

United States Post Office in Alexandria, Virginia

When Mailer is arrested for transgressing a police line at the March on the Pentagon, he is loaded into a Volkswagen and taken to the United States Post Office in Alexandria,

Virginia. So many people are brought to the post office that they are all then moved to another facility for processing.

Occaquan, Virginia

After his stop at the United States Post Office in Alexandria, Virginia, Mailer is taken to Occaquan, Virginia, for processing. He sleeps on a bunk bed Saturday night in a room filled with bunk beds. After he is released on Sunday, he speaks with reporters outside before returning to New York.

Protest Signs

During the march and the rallies, Mailer notices many protest signs. He makes note of them to weigh the sentiment of the crowd.

Nazi Armband

When Mailer is put in the Volkswagen following his arrest, he meets a young blonde man who is wearing a Nazi armband. As a Jew, Mailer is offended by the armband and has an altercation with the young man, which results in the intervention of one of the MPs.

Loud Speakers

Loud speakers come into play several times during the book. The rally organizers use loud speakers in order to speak to their followers. Speakers use loudspeakers for their speeches, and organizers use them to tell people where to go. These instances of loud speakers are all mentioned in a casual, nonchalant way. However, when the Pentagon personnel use a loudspeaker to announce that all protesters must evacuate the area by midnight, Mailer describes the sound from the loudspeaker as the voice of Big Brother, an allusion to George Orwell's 1984.

Themes

Military

The theme of the military runs through the book on many levels. First of all, Mailer has a deep military background as he served in World War II in the middle of his college years. Many of his acquaintances, even those involved in the anti-war movement, served in World War II with him. Because of his military background, Mailer shares memories and feelings he had as a soldier when he was younger.

Mailer often draws correlations between military conquests and the anti-war protest. On the morning of the March on the Pentagon, as the protesters approach the area where the march will be held, Mailer describes them as post-modern soldiers, approaching the battlefield in an array of wild costumes from every time period. He remembers the exhilaration of going into his first battle and feels that this is a similar situation.

In addition to the protesters who are described in military ways. There are actual United States military personnel in the story, and most of them are described as good, honest people. The MPs who arrest Mailer and others seem just as scared as the protesters who are attempting to get arrested. Mailer relates to both groups because he has been a part of both groups at some point in his life. The military imagery in the book includes the sounds of trumpets, the brutality of opposing forces, and the thrill of watching armies assemble.

Media

Mailer discusses the media many times. As a writer, he could be considered a member of the media, but he usually feels victimized by the media. He looks in the newspapers for reports of his involvement in the March, but he doesn't like the way his quotes sound when they're written up in articles.

Mailer's friend Macdonald is a critic, and when they first meet at the party on Thursday night, they feel awkward around each other because Macdonald is currently reviewing one of Mailer's novels. Their positions in the public eye put a minor strain on their relationship because they're fulfilling proscribed positions.

The media is a constant presence in the novel in the form of Dick Fontaine, the BBC documentary filmmaker who follows Mailer around getting footage for a film that will be broadcast in the United Kingdom. Fontaine is always cheerful and encouraging to Mailer, and there are several times when Mailer is especially glad to see him. This symbolizes Mailer's fondness for the media, even though he's loathe to admit that he likes the attention.

Freedom

Through the highs and lows of the story, Mailer returns to the concept of freedom and the privilege it is to live in America where people can express their opinions and speak their minds. Dellinger, the organizer of the March, has recently been in Czechoslovakia where there is little if any freedom of speech. During the history portion of the book, it is clear from the organizational details that the government allowed a lot of leeway for the protesters and its organizers.

Not only does the Pentagon allow protesters to rally and march at its location, but it provides military backup for protection of the citizens. Protesters are allowed to say anything they want against the government and the military, and they are only arrested when they disobey laws about trespassing, which are clearly marked and enforced.

The end of the novel celebrates America's freedom but at the same it has a pessimistic outlook about the future of America. Mailer uses the analogy of America as a pregnant woman. What will she give birth to? It could be totalitarianism, or it could be a new, tender world.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of the book changes in the middle of the book. In the first half of the book, the perspective is third-person limited, with Mailer as the narrator. The perspective is odd because it feels like first-person limited, but the author refers to himself in the third person. The reason it feels like first person limited is because there are many digressions in which the author either explains his opinion on a subject or shares a memory that relates to the subject. Some of these digressions follow a stream-of-consciousness model and are difficult to follow.

The second half of the book is written from a historian's more detached point of view. The feel is more journalistic and non-fiction with fewer asides and little dialogue. There are also large excerpts from outside sources such as magazine and newspaper articles. In the second half of the book, the author no longer talks about himself in the third person, and he doesn't include memories or personal feelings like he does in the first half.

Tone

Like the perspective, the tone shifts from the first half of the book to the last half. The first half is light-hearted most of the time, and the author is humorous. He laughs at himself and pokes fun at many other characters as well. Because the author refers to himself in the third person, his observations are humorous. For example, upon hearing his friend Robert Lowell speak, he says, "Mailer found that he was jealous." This comes across very differently than "I was jealous."

The second half of the book takes on a journalistic tone, which verges on the scholarly at times. The comedy is largely gone, and the author sounds more serious. The last chapter of the book has a very serious, almost ominous tone, which gives the rest of the book a weight it doesn't always carry. The history surrounding the march gives a gravity to the light-hearted moments of the first half of the book.

Structure

The book is clearly divided into two halves, which are divided not only by subtitles but also by tone and perspective. The tone and perspective between the two halves are so distinct that it is possible to randomly open up the book, read a paragraph, and be able to place that page in the first or second halves of the book.

The first half of the book is divided into four parts, which are then divided into chapters. Some chapters are as short as a couple of pages while others are twenty pages or more. In a way, the chapters read like scenes of a screenplay. Each chapter represents

a scene with a distinct setting. The dialogue is broken up by long meditations by the author or long-past memories.

The second half of the book is not divided into parts, but it is divided into chapters. As with the first half, the chapters vary greatly in length, with the last chapter filling less than a page. Instead of scenes, these chapters are divided by topics. Some of these topics include an analysis of how many people attended the March of the Pentagon, a history of the organization of the March, and the media's response to the event.

Quotes

"Mailer nodded. He felt no ease for any of these suggestions. He did not even know if he truly supported the turning in of draft cards. It seemed to him at times that the students who disliked the war most should perhaps be the first to volunteer for the Army in order that their ideas have currency in the Army as well." Page 20

"Mailer was already composing his introductory remarks, percolating along on thoughts of the subtle annoyance his role as Master of Ceremonies would cause the other speakers." Page 27

"Lowell's shoulders had a slump, his modest stomach was pushed forward a hint, his chin was dropped to his chest as he stood at the microphone, pondering for a moment. One did not achieve the languid grandeurs of that slouch in one generation—the grandsons of the first sons had best go through the best troughs in the best eating clubs at Harvard before anyone in the family could try for such elegant note. It was now apparent to Mailer that Lowell would move by instinct, ability, and certainly by choice, in the direction most opposite from himself." Page 44

"Henry James would have come off in a modern interview like a hippie who had taken a correspondence course in forensics." Page 65

"The war in Vietnam was an obscene war, the worst war the nation had ever been in, and so its logic might compel sacrifice from those who were not so accustomed. And, out of hardly more than a sense of old habit and old anger, he scolded the press for their lies, and their misrepresentation, for their guilt in creating a psychology over the last twenty years in the average American which made wars like Vietnam possible; then he surrendered the mike and stepped down and the applause was pleasant." Page 79

"The authority had operated on their brain with commercials, and washed their brain with packaged education, packaged politics. The authority had presented itself as honorable, and it was corrupt, corrupt as payola on television, and scandals concerning the safety of automobiles, and scandals concerning the safety of automobiles, and scandals concerning the leasing of aviation contracts—the real scandals as everyone was beginning to sense were more intimate and could be found in all the products in all the suburban homes which did not work so well as they should have worked, and broke down too soon for mysterious reasons." Page 87

"The same villains who, promiscuously, wantonly, heedlessly, had gorged on LSD and consumed God knows what essential marrows of history, wearing indeed the history of all eras on their back as trophies of this gluttony, were now going forth (conscience-struck?) to make war on those other villains, corporation-land villains, who were destroying the promise of the present in their self-righteousness and greed and secret lust (often unknown to themselves) for some sexo-technological variety of neo-fascism." Page 93

"Yes, Mailer had an egotism of curious disproportions. With the possible exception of John F. Kennedy, there had not been a President of the United States nor even a candidate since the Second World War whom Mailer secretly considered more suitable than himself, and yet on the first day of a war which he thought might go on for twenty years, his real desire was to be back in New York for a party." Page 119

"He was more American than anyone had a right to be, that high worried forehead, narrow receded mouth, white hair, those innocent blue eyes so capable of watching an execution (only to worry about it later) and the steel-rimmed spectacles." Page 169

"Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child—no one knows if legitimate—and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen." Page 288

Topics for Discussion

In the first half of the book, Mailer refers to himself in the third person. Why do you think he does this?

Describe the relationship between Robert Lowell and Norman Mailer. How does their relationship change during the weekend described in the book?

Describe the change in tone and voice between the first half of the book and the last half. Is it possible for the novelist to speak as a historian? Can the historian speak as a novelist?

Mailer describes himself as an egomaniac. Is this a fair assessment? Support your answer with details of specific behaviors in the book.

Mailer discusses the Old Left and the New Left. Is the New Left of the early-1960s similar to the Left of today? How would you classify the New Left in today's terms?

Mailer uses a lot of military imagery and terminology in regards to the march. Was the march a sort of military event or not?

Walter Teague is an interesting minor character who appears several times throughout the book, although we know virtually nothing about his past or future. Construct a past and a future life for Walter Teague based on his characterization in the book.