

FEAR AND LOATHING WITH THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY:

AN EVENING WITH HUNTER S. THOMPSON

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It is a go-to cliché among members of the Athenaeum Society that selecting a topic is the most arduous task of the biennial honor of presenting a paper. As with most clichés, this much—repeated statement is largely based in fact. Until a time more recent than I care to admit, I wrestled with selecting a topic for tonight’s paper. In fact, I did some preliminary work on a few different options, none of which provided sufficient inspiration. I finally hit a bit of luck during a night of insomnia. Sitting on my couch and surfing the television dial randomly, I came across a movie with which I was vaguely familiar, but had never seen. I was immediately transfixed by its general weirdness. Perhaps it was the lack of sleep, but after viewing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, I was certain I had stumbled upon a subject worthy of the first Athenaeum meeting of 2014: noted author and fellow-Kentuckian, Hunter S. Thompson.

For those of you familiar with Hunter S. Thompson’s work, you may understand why I feel the need to offer a brief disclaimer prior to delving into his world. Mr. Thompson’s story is one of drugs, guns, radicalism and profanity. It is a story of riding with Hell’s Angels, serving time and blowing up cars in the desert. It is a story of excess: excess in talent, excess in fear and hate, excess in psychedelics and excess in dynamite. It is a story of the fine line between brilliance and insanity, between fact and fiction. It is also a story filled with R rated subject matter and language. I am not much for profanity in a semi-serious setting like the one we have here. However, I think it would be all but impossible to transform Hunter S. Thompson into some sort of Disney character, so I will ask your forgiveness if I occasionally step slightly outside the bounds of our typical decorum in quoting Mr. Thompson. A second disclaimer. Hunter S. Thompson lived far too much life to be covered by a paper of acceptable length. For

this reason, in tonight's paper, I will attempt to highlight his life and work, with particular focus on his innovative 1970's work in new journalism.

Hunter S. Thompson was born in July of 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky, and grew up in the upper-middle class Highlands neighborhood. From an outside perspective, there would be nothing in Thompson's early childhood to suggest the bizarre path that his life would eventually take. His father was a relatively successful insurance adjuster, and his mother worked as a librarian. Hunter was an intelligent child who excelled in sports. Thompson's somewhat idyllic early life changed suddenly with the death of his father in 1951, when Hunter was just 14 years old. The family was in no way prepared financially, and was essentially left destitute. In an event that foreshadowed Hunter's future struggles, his mother began to drink heavily.

Thompson sought escape from his depressing home life in the same manner that he would seek relief throughout his life; through writing and through trouble. He attended Atherton High in Louisville until his junior year, at which time he transferred to Male. There, he flexed his literary muscle in the school paper and in the Athenaeum Society, a literary club that had been active at Male since 1862. "I learned at the age of fifteen that to get by you had to find the one thing you can do better than anybody else...at least this was so in my case. I figured that out early. It was writing. It was the rock in my sock. Easier than algebra. It was always work, but it was always worthwhile work. I was fascinated by seeing my byline in print. It was a rush. Still is." *The Paris Review*. While he was more than capable on the literary side, his penchant for trouble began to interfere. Thompson began skipping school to drink at bars on Bardstown Road with classmates. Ultimately, he was kicked out of school, and the Athenaeum

Society for good measure, when he was convicted of accessory to robbery during his senior year in 1955. After doing 30 days of a 60 day sentence, Thompson was given the option of joining the military in exchange for probating the balance of his sentence. He took the deal, and enlisted in the United States Air Force. And so, a rebellious juvenile delinquent with a penchant for substance abuse and anarchy set out to defend the country. As you might expect, his military career was a short and inglorious one.

After Basic Training, Thompson was assigned to Eglin Air Force Base at Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. He was initially assigned to an electronics program, but ultimately hustled his way into the assignment of writing sports for the *Command Courier* on base, a job which opened up under rather fortuitous circumstances. "It turned out that the sports editor of the base newspaper, a staff sergeant, had been arrested in Pensacola and put in jail for public drunkenness, pissing against the side of a building; it was the third time and they wouldn't let him out." *The Paris Review*. Thompson lied about his writing experience, and was given the job. Setting aside for a moment the irony in Hunter S. Thompson getting a job due to someone else's inebriation, this was a seminal moment for Thompson, as it was his first real writing job. Thompson was further able to hone his craft by moonlighting with the local civilian paper, an act very much against Air Force regulations. Not surprisingly, Thompson's military career ended after less than three years of service when his commanding officer recommended an early honorable discharge. The language contained in that recommendation from Colonel William S. Evans is telling. "Sometimes his rebel and superior attitude seem to rub off on other airmen and staff members. In summary, this airman, although talented, will not be guided by policy." *Fear and Loathing, the Strange*

*and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson.* It was 1958, and the US military was going to have to make it without Hunter S. Thompson.

Thompson spent much of the next decade in nomadic fashion, bouncing from one failed writing effort to another. He was initially hired as a copyboy at *Time Magazine*, but was promptly fired for insubordination. He then took a job as a reporter at a small paper in upstate New York only to be let go after a violent assault on a candy machine. From there, he worked small independent reporting jobs across the country and then into Central and South America. It was during his time in South America that he would write his only novel to be published, *The Rum Diary*. The only trouble for the impoverished young writer was that this book would not be published until 1998. Following his time in Latin America, Thompson hitchhiked across the country, and ultimately landed in San Francisco. It was there that Thompson would produce his first meaningful work.

In 1965, there was a great deal of hand-wringing on the west coast about crime and the general mayhem associated with motorcycle gangs. Thompson was hired by *The Nation* magazine to do a story on the Hell's Angels. Ultimately, this effort turned into Thompson's first published book entitled *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*. In what would be a literary mainstay for Thompson, he attacked the piece by throwing himself into the world of his subject. In this case, he did so by actually riding with the Hell's Angels in California for nearly a year. The book that resulted from his experiences was well received in journalistic circles not only for its brutally honest depiction of the violent and terrifying life of the

Angels, but also its ability to explain the plight of these dangerous characters in 1960's America.

“...there is more to their stance than a wistful yearning for acceptance in a world they never made. Their real motivation is an instinctive certainty as to what the score really is. They are out of the ballgame and they know it. Unlike the campus rebels, who with a minimum amount of effort will emerge from their struggle with a validated ticket to status, the outlaw motorcyclist views the future with the baleful eye of a man with no upward mobility at all. In a world increasingly geared to specialists, technicians and fantastically complicated machinery, the Hell's Angels are obvious losers and it bugs them. But instead of submitting quietly to their collective fate, they have made it the base of a full-time social vendetta. They don't expect to win anything, but on the other hand, they have nothing to lose.” *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs.*

As if to emphasize the point Thompson made about the social vendetta, the Hell's Angels viciously and seemingly randomly jumped Thompson on Labor Day of 1966. Thompson sustained a severe beating that resulted in a fractured rib among other injuries. He survived the attack only because a gang member named Tiny, who had been friendly with Thompson, persuaded another Angel not to drop of large stone on Thompson's head as Thompson lay bleeding on the barroom floor. Thompson summarized his experiences, to include the harrowing end of his days as an unofficial Angel, at the close of his book. “My face looked like it had been jammed into the spokes of a speeding Harley, and the only thing keeping me awake was the spastic pain of a broken rib. It had been a bad trip...fast and wild in some moments, slow and dirty in

others, but on balance it looked like a bummer. On my way back to San Francisco, I tried to compose a fitting epitaph. I wanted something original, but there was no escaping the echo of Mistah Kurtz' final words from the heart of darkness: 'The horror! The horror!..Exterminate all the brutes!' *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs.*

The success of the *Hell's Angels* book afforded Thompson both a degree of financial security and an assortment of legitimate writing opportunities. He used the bulk of his earnings to purchase a small farm in Woody Creek, Colorado. Though Thompson continued to travel frequently, Owl Farm, as Thompson called it, would remain his home for the rest of his life. Now recognized as a legitimate journalist, he was offered assignments from respected periodicals such as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Esquire* and *Harper's*. But it was an article in the short-lived, rarely read *Scanlan's Monthly* that would usher in the true voice of Hunter S. Thompson.

In May of 1970, Thompson was hired by *Scanlan's Monthly* to do a story on the Kentucky Derby. (As an aside on *Scanlan's*, the magazine folded after less than a year in print. It was a politically radical magazine that once featured Richard Nixon being punched in the face on the cover.) The Derby Story was a natural for Thompson, who would attend the Derby in his hometown as he had done many times in the past. The story, published in the June, 1970 edition of the magazine, was titled *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*. The story mentions horses or horseracing only in passing, and is instead a fantastical first-person account of a multiday Thompson drinking binge. Thompson's central theme, if there is such a thing, has to do with what he considers to be the failed elitist culture of the patrons.

In the article, Thompson wrote of wanting to identify a certain face in the crowd that represented that theme to his reader. “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...So the face I was trying to find at Churchill Downs that weekend was a symbol, in my own mind, of the whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is.” *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*.

For the first several pages of the article, normal journalistic style is utilized. (Despite the fact that these “normal” pages detail constant drinking, randomly macing his waiter and his sister-in-law at a restaurant and lying to Texas oil men that he is there covering the impending Black Panther riots at the race for Playboy Magazine.) Then, from the race itself forward, Thompson’s writing style reverts to an almost stream of consciousness account of the remainder of the trip, when Thompson found himself “churning around in a sea of drunken horrors.” Some excerpts:

On the luxury box crowd. “Pink faces with stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and buttdown collars, Mayblossom senility..burnt out early or maybe just not much to burn in the first place. Not much energy in these faces, not much curiosity. Suffering in silence, nowhere to go after thirty in this life, just hang on and humor the children. Let the young enjoy themselves while they can. Why not? The grim reaper comes early in this league.” *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*



On his continued drunkenness. “The rest of that day blurs into madness. The rest of that night too. And all the next day and night. Such horrible things occurred that I can’t bring myself even to think of them now, much less put them down in print. Steadman (English photographer) was lucky to get out of Louisville without serious injuries, and I was lucky to get out at all.” *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*

Finally, on finding the face he had searched for to epitomize the ugliness of the Derby experience. “My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant I thought that Ralph had brought somebody with him—a model for that one special face we’d been looking for. There he was, by God— a puffy, drink ravaged, disease-ridden caricature...like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother’s family photo album. It was the face we’d been looking for—and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible.”

Thompson’s work did not reach print easily, and there was no indication it would be a noteworthy piece. Scanlan’s editor Warren Hinckle described to *Rolling Stone Magazine* the arduous task of prying work out of Thompson. According to Hinckle, several days after the Derby, or as soon as Thompson could walk, he was flown to a Manhattan hotel where he was sequestered until he could complete the assignment. Copyboys were sent hourly to check on his progress. Thompson, who did not feel at all confident about the drunken ramblings contained in his article, described the scene as follows: “I’d lie in my tub at the Royalton. I thought I had failed completely as a journalist, I thought it was probably the end of my career. Steadman’s drawings were in

place. All I could think of was the white space where my text was supposed to be. Finally, in desperation and embarrassment, I began to rip the pages out of my notebook and give them to a copyboy to take to a fax machine down the street. When I left, I was a broken man, failed totally and convinced I'd be exposed when the stuff came out."

To his surprise, Thompson was wrong about this. Not only was he not done as a journalist, but his work, particularly the most bizarre portion, was being hailed as a new style of first person, almost impressionistic journalism. *Boston Globe* editor Bill Cardoso, in a letter to Thompson, coined the term that would forever be used in conjunction with Thompson from that point onward. "Forget all this shit you've been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo." Gonzo journalism was born, and Hunter S. Thompson, much to his own surprise, was the trailblazer. "...when it came out, there were these 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 of mermaids."

If the Derby article for *Scanlan's* was the birth of Gonzo Journalism, Thompson's next major project was the full grown adult version. In 1970, Thompson was granted an assignment by *Sports Illustrated* to cover the Mint 400 motorcycle race in Las Vegas. Thompson traveled with his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta, a 300 pound Hispanic lawyer and Mexican rights advocate who Thompson described as follows: "One of God's own prototypes. A high-powered mutant of some kind never even considered for mass production. Too weird to live, and too rare to die." The assignment was a 250 word piece on a desert motorcycle race. Thompson, never much for editorial guidelines,

instead submitted a 2500 word manuscript on the death of the American dream. This draft was, according to Thompson “aggressively rejected.” However, the idea sparked the interest of *Rolling Stone*, who first published the work as a two part series in November of 1971. In 1972, the full book was released as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson’s Gonzo journalism masterpiece. The book is a highly fantasized first-person account of Thompson and Acosta, under the pseudonyms Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, as they engage in a drug-induced quest for the American dream in Las Vegas.

The book’s opening lines: “We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the dessert 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 this 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. And a voice was screaming: ‘Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?’ No point mentioning the bats, I thought. The poor bastard will see them soon enough.” *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The bats, of course, were a product of the drugs, described in great detail by Thompson as “two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high power blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers...and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether, and two dozen amyls.” *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Intertwined with the hijinks the impossibly inebriated duo encounter covering the Mint 400 and a police narcotic training convention is the very serious subject of the

American dream, and Thompson's melancholy view of it. The book is a reflection of the counterculture movement of the 1960's, and Thompson's last hope for finding remnants of it on his drug-fueled quest. As the title would suggest, the quest is in vain, and the duo leave Las Vegas convinced that the counterculture movement has failed, and that the American dream is dead, a position he would continue to hold throughout his life.

Around the time Thompson was writing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he decided to dabble in local politics by running for Sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado. Thompson ran under the "Freak Power" ticket. His platform consisted of legalization of drugs, tearing up roads in favor of pedestrian malls, and renaming Aspen "Fat City" to deter investors and resulting commercialism. He did make the prudent campaign promise to not use mescaline (peyote derivative) while on duty. Amazingly, and somewhat frighteningly, he actually won the city of Aspen and nearly won the election. This would be Thompson's last effort as a political candidate, but only the beginning of his involvement in politics.

Thompson's next major journalistic project was his coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign between Richard Nixon and Senator George McGovern. Thompson initially covered the story as a correspondent for *Rolling Stone*, but his work was ultimately published in total as the book *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*. In this piece, Thompson uses the same first-person Gonzo style to tackle the world of presidential politics. Thompson on his approach: "As far as I was concerned, there was no such thing as 'off the record.'" The most consistent and ultimately damaging failure of political journalism in America has its roots in the clubby/cocktail personal relationships that inevitably develop between politicians and journalists." There would be no such

personal relationships between Thompson and the candidates he covered in 1972, or in his many political pieces that followed. Though he respected McGovern, he never developed a personal relationship with him. But Thompson reserved his most vitriolic words for Nixon, who he despised.

“Richard Nixon has never been one of my favorite people anyway. For years, I’ve regarded him as a monument to all the rancid genes and broken chromosomes that corrupt the possibilities of the American Dream; he was a foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad. The Nixon I remembered was absolutely humorless; I couldn’t imagine him laughing at anything except maybe a paraplegic who wanted to vote Democrat but couldn’t quite reach the lever of the voting machine.” *Pageant*.

In later years, even Nixon’s death could not warm Thompson to him. Thompson, angered over the fact that various commentators had softened their Nixon stance following his passing, eulogized Nixon for a piece in *Rolling Stone* he called “He Was a Crook.” “If the right people had been in charge of Nixon’s funeral, his casket would have been launched into one of those open sewage canals that empty into the ocean just south of Los Angeles. He was a swine of a man and a jabbering dupe of a president. Nixon was so crooked that he needed servants to help him screw his pants on in the morning. Even his funeral was illegal. He was queer in the deepest way. His body should have been burned in a trash bin.” *Rolling Stone*

Nixon was not the only political figure to feel Thompson’s wrath. His work on the 1972 campaign trail only strengthened his distrust for the major political machinery, and

he had little use for any major political leader. George W. Bush was a consistent target. In a 2004 *Rolling Stone* piece, Thompson offered the following description. "Bush is a natural-born loser with a filthy-rich daddy who pimped his son out to rich oil-mongers. He hates music, football and sex, in no particular order, and he is no fun at all." *Rolling Stone*

The animosity towards Nixon and Bush may lead one to pigeon-hole Thompson into the far left side of the political spectrum. With Thompson, any such stereotyping is dangerous. Thompson is a self-described gun nut and lifelong member of the NRA. He has been quoted as stating that one of his longest and most cherished friendships is with Pat Robertson. And he has authored words about Bill Clinton every bit as damning as those he launched at Richard Nixon. During an interview with David Letterman at the time of the Lewinski scandal, Thompson called Clinton a "sleazy, treacherous animal."

Thompson continued to write extensively about politics, culture, sports and anything else that interested him throughout the 70's, 80's, 90's and on into the new millennium. He did so through books, as well as in articles for *Rolling Stone*, *ESPN*, *The Boston Globe*, *the Chicago Tribune*, *Vanity Fair*, *the New York Times*, *Playboy* and many others. While his writing remained prolific as he advanced in age, his wild lifestyle kept up the pace as well. Thompson was arrested on more than one occasion, typically while in possession of illegal drugs, but was typically able to beat the charges. In 1990, when a female partygoer at Owl Farm accused the 53 year old Thompson of groping her in a hot tub, the police searched the home to find a vast array of drugs and a few

sticks of dynamite for good measure. Charges were dropped on finding of an illegal search.

In one of Thompson's final interviews, he was asked by *Salon Magazine* about being arrested on multiple occasions throughout his life. "Goddammit, Yeah, I have. First, there's a huge difference between being arrested and being guilty. Second, see, the law changes and I don't. How I stand vis-a-vi the law at any given moment depends upon the law. The law can change from state to state, from nation to nation, from city to city. I guess I have to go by a higher law. How's that? Yeah, I consider myself a road man for the lords of karma." *Salon Magazine*

It was the bizarre behavior, as much as the writing, that made Hunter S. Thompson a cult celebrity, and his fame has continually increased many years after his work first gained notoriety as it has been disseminated across various platforms of media. He was a popular guest on shows like David Letterman. His world view was shared with a new and wider audience in 1998 with the theatrical release of the *Fear and Loathing in a Las Vegas* film, starring Johnny Depp in the role of Thompson. This was actually the second movie based on Thompson. Bill Murray played Thompson in the 1980 film *Where the Buffalo roam*. More recently, Depp again played Thompson in the 2011 film version of Thompson's early novel, *The Rum Diary*. He's even been depicted as Uncle Duke in the comic strip *Doonesbury*.

On February 20, 2005, at age 67, Hunter S. Thompson took his own life with a gunshot wound to the head. Thompson's friends and family did not perceive Thompson's suicide as an act of desperation, but rather a conscious, and fairly

predictable, life choice based in part on his poor health. His longtime friend and illustrator Ralph Steadman said of Thompson's death: "he told me 25 years ago that he would feel real trapped if he didn't know that he could commit suicide at any moment. I don't know if that is brave or stupid or what, but it was inevitable. I think the truth of what rings through in all of his writing is that he meant what he said. If that is entertainment to you, well, that's OK. If you think that it enlightened you, well, that's even better. If you wonder if he's gone to Heaven or Hell, rest assured he will check them both out, find out which one Richard Milhous Nixon went to – and go there. He could never stand being bored. But there must be Football too- and Peacocks."

Thompson also left a few words on his death in the form of a note to his wife, later published by *Rolling Stone* as Thompson's Suicide note. "No More games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun- for anybody. 67. You are getting Greedy. Act your (old) age. Relax- this won't hurt."

Thompson's funeral, at his bequest, featured his ashes being shot out of a canon sitting atop a 150 foot tower in the shape of Thompson's Freak Power campaign sign. This production was accompanied by fireworks to the tune of "Spirit in the Sky" and "Mister Tambourine Man." It was funded by his friend Johnny Depp and attended by George McGovern, John Kerry, Jack Nicholson, John Cusack, Bill Murray, Sean Penn, Ed Bradley and Charlie Rose amongst many others.

So what is there to take from the wild life and works of Hunter S. Thompson? He was a man deeply flawed. He was egomaniacal. Thompson had to be the star of every



story and every party, cared little for anyone else's schedule, and was confident in his literary and journalistic greatness even before anyone else shared his opinion. He was an addict. He claims to have never written anything in his life sober, and there seems to be ample proof that this is the case. He was likely mentally ill. He was quoted as saying that "if you're going to be crazy, you have to get paid for it or else you're going to be locked up."

Yet it was in part as a result of all of Thompson's shortcomings that he was able to essentially invent a new way of reporting. By injecting himself into his stories, he was able to show actual human response to circumstances, even when those responses may have been the absurdly exaggerated reactions of the author himself. To Thompson, being factual was not as important as being truthful. And objectivity, from a traditional stance, was irrelevant. "So much for Objective Journalism. Don't bother to look for it here-not under any byline of mine; or anyone else I can think of. With the possible exception of things like a box score, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase is a pompous contradiction of terms." *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*. The implication here is that Thompson recognized that all reporting was biased reporting. His work simply took out any pretense of objectivity. For Thompson, that made the work honest.

Thompson himself is a contradiction. One part 1960's counter-culture hippy. One part gun-toting irate radical. Doubter of the American dream despite living it for 67 years. Ultimately, Thompson's words sum the whole thing up better than I can. "I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence or insanity to anyone, but they've always worked for me." *Washington Post*