

**Caricature, Secular Shamanism, and
Cultural Compensation in Hunter S.
Thompson's *Fear and Loathing
on the Campaign Trail '72* and
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas
by Sue Matheson**

In *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail '72*, American politics become a Gothic nightmare. During the month of October, Hunter S. Thompson discovers that Richard Nixon, “[o]ur Barbie doll President, with his Barbie doll wife and his box-full of Barbie doll children,” is really “America’s answer to the monstrous Mr. Hyde” (416-17). According to Thompson, Nixon turns into a shape-shifter “[at] the stroke of midnight in Washington”: “a drooling, red-eyed beast with the legs of a man and a head of a giant hyena crawls out of its bedroom window in the South Wing of the White House and leaps fifty feet down to the lawn . . . pauses briefly to strangle the Chow watchdog, then races off into the darkness . . . towards the Watergate, snarling with lust, loping through the alleys behind Pennsylvania Avenue” (417). Even more frightening than the monster’s desperate hunt for Martha Mitchell’s balcony is Thompson’s insight that Nixon speaks not only for himself but also for “the Werewolf in us” (417). Earlier in the text, Thompson discovers that he himself is not immune to the psychic infection spread by high-stakes American politics. In what is arguably one of the text’s most brilliantly grotesque passages, he discovers that the repressed contents of his mind, like those of Nixon’s, too are beginning to erupt. In June, Thompson’s own body begins to change while on the campaign trail: he says, “[M]y fingernails are growing at a fantastic rate of speed.” Morphing into a werewolf-like caricature of a journalist, he writes that his nails “are turning into claws; my standard-size clippers will no longer cut the growth, so now I carry a set of huge toe-nail clippers and snake off every night around dusk, regardless of where I am—in any city, hamlet, or plastic hotel room along the campaign trail—to chop another quarter of an inch or so off of all ten fingers” (219-20).

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson’s use of caricature to express inner states consciousness becomes more extreme and, if possible, even more savage. Having turned his attention from the predators prowling the passageways of the

White House to those who voted the Nixon administration into power, Thompson investigates what his narrator, Raoul Duke, terms the socio-psychic factor underpinning America—the average American’s ability to shape-shift into a predator: that is to become a dangerous weasel, eel, or huge blood-sucking reptile at a moment’s notice. If Thompson is to be believed, this destructive force, deeply embedded in the individual’s mind, is also a fundamental part of the American psyche. Almost a decade earlier, in *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign ’72*, Nixon displayed this tendency since he campaigned as one half of “the legendary duality—the congenital Split Personality and polarized instincts—that almost everybody except Americans has long since taken for granted as the key to our National Character” (417). Nixon, according to Thompson, exhibited “the bully” in all Americans, “the predatory shyster who turns into something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string-warts, on nights when the moon comes too close” (418). In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, all Americans have the ability to embody this phenomenon. If one is to believe the good Doctor, not one of us is exempt from the national feeding frenzy taking place in the Mint Hotel in the Nevada desert. There, “huge pterodactyls” lumber “around the corridors in pools of fresh blood” (27). After 1970, Raoul Duke (a.k.a. Hunter S. Thompson) notes, “We are all wired into a *survival* trip now” (178).

However they may differ, critical articles on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, among them John Hellman’s “Journalism and Parody: The Bestial Comedies of Hunter S. Thompson,” Bruce-Nova’s “Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail,” Matt Johnson’s “Above the Fear and Loathing (Briefly): Hunter S. Thompson and Professional Athletics,” and Edward Parkinson’s “Hunting for the Truth: Fear and Loathing in the State of Denmark,” agree that Thompson’s emphasis on excess is a crucial component of his social and/or political critique.¹ John Hellman, in particular, argues that Thompson’s political caricatures in *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail ’72* are effective because one of their aims is the corrective impulse of satire (70). That is, Thompson’s ironic portraits of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew provide his readers with powerful correctives, revealing the corruption endemic in American politics during the later stages of the Vietnam War. After all, as Thompson himself points out, no state would wish to be known as “A Nation of Pigs” (418). To date, however, Thompson’s use of caricature, in particular his ironic manipulation of hyperbole regarding the National Character in *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail ’72* and especially in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, has not been examined as a painstakingly-constructed *cultural* corrective.

To understand how *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Duke’s story, functions as a cultural cure for what Thompson identifies in *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail ’72* as “that dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character” (416), it is necessary to understand why the Gonzo journalist acts as he does. Abandoning the objective stance of the news reporter, the Gonzo journalist embraces, arguably one may say flaunts, the inherently limited and biased perceptions of any first person narrator. In touch with the deeper layers of his or her culture’s psyche, such a narrator, like Duke, who tells tales that serve as cultural correctives, functions shamanistically, because his or her story is a response to psychic imbalance on a grand scale.

As Mircea Eliade points out, shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and central Asia. The great master of ecstasy, the shaman specializes in a trance during which the spirit is believed to leave his or her body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld (*Shamanism* 4-5). Like the shaman, who alters his or her consciousness in order to experience the sense of wholeness which existed before the fall into History and Time, these narrators often

deliberately attempt to escape ego-consciousness through the use of mood-altering drugs. What prompts this experience, generally expressed as a journey, is an imbalance in the psyche of the narrator's culture.

According to Carl Jung, the psyche of Western culture is so severely imbalanced that it is dissociated like that of a neurotic (*Unconscious* 72). America, Thompson insists, is not an exception to this rule. Noting the "almost Yin/Yang clarity" in the difference between Nixon and McGovern, Thompson recognizes the neurotic nature of America in its national politics in *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail '72* (416). Like Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, America's psyche is split in two. This sort of cultural dissociation, which Jung says is an aspect of the "'modern' cultural mind," expresses itself in a communal shadow, the dark side of its nature (*Unconscious* 72-73). In primitive cultures, communal shadows are expressed as imbalances in the spirit world. The shaman responds to an imbalance in the spirit world by falling into a trance. Having spoken with the spirits, he or she then corrects the problem by revealing the problem on his or her return.

Arguably, journalists, in general, function like secular versions of the shaman. After all, journalists investigate social crises on the behalf of their communities and the stories which they tell on their returns often help to correct the problems they report. Unlike the shaman, most journalists do not alter their states of consciousness to interview their subjects. Gonzo journalists, however, do experience altered states of consciousness. Doing so, they, like the shaman, often encounter what may be regarded as the contents of America's collective unconscious. In *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail '72*, for example, Thompson enters what is essentially an altered state of consciousness generated by political campaigns which are "a tremendous high for everybody involved" (497) to reveal America's communal shadow embodied by "one of the most consistently unpopular politicians in American history" and his closest advisors who "are being caught almost daily in nazi-style gigs that would have embarrassed Martin Bormann" (417-18). In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Raoul Duke, narrator and Gonzo journalist extra-ordinaire, changes his state of consciousness synthetically to "cover the story" of "Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs" (12).

Thus, Duke, like a shaman, experiences what Jung terms the "night-side of life" during his psychic descent into the collective unconscious (*Spirit* 95). The story of a drug-crazed reporter let loose in the casinos of the Las Vegas Strip, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* documents Raoul Duke's adventures in the American West. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Duke travels with his attorney from Los Angeles through the wasteland of the California and Nevada desert to Las Vegas. The bizarre events and frightening perceptions which he experiences during his "trip" are the result of a deliberate psychedelical investigation into the nature of the American Dream. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, an imbalanced psyche is proof that one is pursuing the American Dream. In fact, in Las Vegas, it would be abnormal not to be mentally deranged. As Raoul Duke points out, "in a town full of bedrock crazies, nobody even notices an acid freak" (24).

Ironically, the American Character does not seem to have changed much since Eden's new Adams and Eves disembarked from the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock. Still embracing a "blind faith in some high and wiser 'authority' . . . The Pope, The General, The Prime Minister . . . all the way up to 'God'" (179), Duke's generation of "failed seekers" in the Sixties share the Puritans' assumption that "somebody—or at least some force—is tending that light at the end of the tunnel" (179). Quite simply, it did not occur to the optimistic but soon-to-be-enlightened Acid Culture that no one/thing is actually there. A member of the Acid Culture, Duke also assumes the

existence of a Universal Organizing Intelligence. Ironically, while driving “half-crazy with fear . . . 120 miles an hour across Death Valley in some car [he] never even wanted” (87), he finds himself on the run because of God. “All I did was take your gibberish *seriously*,” he says, “[A]nd you see where it got me? My primitive Christian instincts have made me a criminal” (87). Ensuring that the reader does not mistake his use of the word, “you,” as a rhetorical device, Duke informs the Supreme Being, “You’d better take care of me, Lord . . . because if you don’t you’re going to have me *on your hands*” (87).

While talking to the spirits as Duke does, every shaman gathers the information necessary to fulfill his or her mandate on returning to earth—that is to enlighten his or her community about the imbalance occurring in the spirit world. Thus, Duke’s pursuit of the American Dream is carefully presented as a profane initiation rite which Americans must experience in order to learn what aspects of the Dream their culture has repressed, “[v]enal, mortal, carnal, major, minor” (86), and he explicitly invokes its conventional interpretations as his story begins. “A gross physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country,” Duke’s search for the source of the Dream, that “strange torpedo” of Christianity and commerce, begins as “a classic affirmation of everything right, true and decent in the national character” (11).

Appropriately, in order to familiarize himself with the underside of the American Dream, Duke experiences an altered state of consciousness. Thompson’s narrator adjusts his perceptions with a trunk-load of drugs. On the way to Las Vegas, Duke and his attorney ingest the better part of “two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine . . . a whole galaxy of multi-coloured 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” (4).

All categories of shamans have their helping or tutelary spirits which often manifest themselves as animals (*Shamanism* 91). Functioning as just such a companion, Duke’s attorney is a “degenerate pig” (110). After locating “a convertible with adequate horsepower and adequate coloring” (12), Dr. Gonzo helps Duke alter his consciousness and deteriorates with him to “the level of dumb beasts” (8). In Vegas, the attorney, in his tutelary capacity as Duke’s companion, reveals the secrets of the casino world, among them, “the fear” at the Circus-Circus (47). He talks Duke through a particularly hellish altered state, saying, “Don’t try to fight it, or you’ll start getting brain bubbles . . . strokes, aneurisms” (134). Dr. Gonzo also generously initiates a D.A. from Georgia into the ways of Dope Fiends: he informs the man that “they work in pairs, Sometimes in gangs. They’ll climb into your bedroom and sit on your chest, with big Bowie knives” (145).

While on an ether high, Duke experiences ego-dissociation, a state comparable to that of the shaman in a trance or dream-state, during which he or she participates in what Eliade terms the condition of “the spirits” while still continuing to exist in the flesh (*Myths* 70). Duke attributes this sensation to the drug which he has ingested: as he remarks, when a person takes “devil ether”—“a total body drug”—he behaves “like a village drunkard in some early Irish novel,” because “the mind is unable to communicate with the spinal column”; in spite of this lack of communication, “the brain continues to function more or less normally.” Separated, Duke’s brain finds itself detached, watching its body behaving in a “terrible way,” but unable to “control it” (45-46).

Having achieved the state of ego-dissociation which allows him access to the collective psyche, Duke is shocked by the horrific nature of the American Dream’s

contents. As Robert C. Sickels points out in “A Counterculture *Gatsby*: Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the Death of the American Dream and the Rise of Las Vegas, USA,” the sorry condition of American culture prompts Duke to realize that “his belief in possibility was merely illusory faith in a false myth” (67). Duke’s nightmarish experience is similar to that often experienced by shamans when they encounter the inhabitants of the spirit world. In Las Vegas, Duke encounters a debased version of the Dream expressed in terms of the shadow: instincts and drives which individuals deny having themselves but can plainly see in others. Here it is important to note that in Las Vegas, the accumulative instinct, a healthy drive that fuels the Free Enterprise system, has become a debased *and* a displaced appetite. A city populated by cold-blooded reptilian predators, Vegas is a place in which people prey on one another. At Circus-Circus, “the customers are being hustled by every conceivable kind of bizarre shuck” (46). Although the American Dream promises its adherents an upward movement to higher planes of material and spiritual existence, in Thompson’s text, the movement is unquestionably a downward slide. Indeed, it seems that the closer Duke comes to the heart of the Dream in Sin City, the more corrupt and unnatural human behavior becomes. Expressed in terms of material appetite, the underside of Las Vegas reveals itself as a primordial food chain in a very literal sense. Duke finds himself surrounded by metaphorical prehistoric brutes in the blood-soaked lobby of the Mint Hotel. On the Strip, the nightmarish reality that underlies the vision of the Big Winner is a brutish material Darwinism. Reduced to reptiles living in primordial ooze, the employees of the Mint Hotel appear as a bewildering array of cold-hearted, cold-blooded, dangerous, poisonous creatures. Duke whispers to his attorney, “Order some golf shoes . . . otherwise we’ll never get out of this place alive. You notice these lizards [the hotel employees] don’t have any trouble moving around in this muck; it’s because they have claws on their feet” (24).

Duke learns, much to his dismay, that in this system the appropriate place of the gambler is at the bottom of the food chain. At Circus-Circus, doing what “the whole hep world would be . . . on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war,” Duke is nothing more than “fresh meat” (46). In the parking lot of the Mint, he finally realizes that this is what his role really is. In a world composed of hunters and the hunted, he is one of the hunted. “The weasels were closing in,” he says, “I could smell the ugly brutes” (78). Although he attempts to imagine how Horatio Alger would have handled this situation, it appears that even Alger is no match for the Strip’s carnivores. On an ether high at the Mint, Duke enlists the aid of his lawyer to escape from the clerk at the hotel’s front desk who appears to be just as deadly as her guests, one of which is “a huge reptile . . . gnawing on a woman’s neck” (24). In this state of heightened awareness, Duke discovers the clerk’s face “changing: swelling, pulsing . . . horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out, the face of a Moray Eel! Deadly poison!” (23-24). Las Vegas, Duke notes later, is no place for a criminal freak because “the shark ethic prevails—eat the wounded” (72).

In the natural world, predators survive by eating the weak and the wounded. Such biological pragmatism does not seem “unnatural,” because culling the unfit is an activity that generally occurs between species: wolves, for example, habitually stalk and kill the old, the young, and the injured, and thereby increase their chances of filling their stomachs. In Vegas, however, human beings prey on each other. The ultimate consumer get-away, Vegas is inhabited by cannibals. Thompson’s ironic treatment of social Darwinism, the city’s *modus operandi*, as cannibalism becomes explicit later in the text. As Duke’s attorney notes at The Big Flip, “The action never stops in this town . . . A man with the right contacts could probably pick up all the

fresh adrenochrome [obtained from the adrenaline glands of a living human being] he wanted, if he hung around here for a while” (135).

Having revealed the grisly and grotesque secret of material success in America, Thompson then turns to examining other mysteries sacred to the Dream, in particular, its promise of transcendence. In order to transcend the limitations of this world, one must first withdraw from it. Like the shaman’s period of seclusion during which he or she experiences a physical and emotional withdrawal, Duke’s sojourn in Room 1850 with his attorney at the Mint Hotel involves a physical and emotional withdrawal from the world. Indeed, “bolted” into 1850 with his attorney high on a “whole blotter” of acid (56, 58), Duke undergoes a corrupted version of the initiation rites found in male secret societies and used by shamans. Expressed mythologically as a descent or journey into the belly of a giant or monster “to learn science or wisdom” (*Myths* 225), these rites, often expressed as torture, dismemberment, and death, allow the shaman to make contact with and reactivate what Eliade terms the “secrets of the tribe.” Like the neophyte, who having passed through the initial stage of his initiation, takes a new name, Duke receives a telegram addressed to Hunter S. Thompson which orders him to begin the next stage of his quest for the Dream, the National District Attorney’s Drug Convention at the Flamingo Hotel.

Because death and rebirth is the central experience for both the shaman and the initiate, candidates of male secret societies are made to look like and imitate the behavior of ghosts (*Myths* 198). After all, in order to talk with the spirits, one must first become like one. Duke’s death experience is the result of eating pure adrenochrome, “obtained from the adrenaline glands from a *living* human body” (132). Under the influence of adrenochrome, Duke becomes like the living dead. Disassociated from his body, Duke hears himself “breathing heavily” (134). Like a zombie, he then experiences “[t]otal paralysis” (133). “Every muscle in my body was contracted,” he says, “I couldn’t even move my eyeballs, much less turn my head or talk Not even my lungs seemed to be functioning. I needed artificial respiration but I couldn’t open my mouth to say so” (133). Notably, during this phase of Duke’s initiation, Nixon’s face fills the television screen. Acting as the high priest of American culture, the President defines and reinforces the nature of the activity in which the initiate is engaged. As a neophyte, Duke is clearly expected to be a participant in his culture’s rite of initiatory death. Nixon is speaking about the Vietnam War, but the only words that Duke hears are: “Sacrifice . . . sacrifice . . . sacrifice” (134).

Like war, in Western culture bathing carries with it the experience of death and rebirth. In his hotel room in the Mint, Duke finds his fellow initiate immersed in bathwater like the neophyte who is buried or newly laid out in an open grave (*Myths* 198). Lying in the tub, Dr. Gonzo wants to die. “I dig my own graves,” he informs Duke. “Green water and White Rabbit” are the necessary elements of Gonzo’s “suicide trip,” and at the peak of “White Rabbit,” Duke is supposed to throw the tape recorder into the tub (58-60). Although Duke throws a grapefruit into the water instead, the results of the ritual appear to be satisfying: thrashing about wildly, Gonzo experiences what appears to have been “some awful psychic orgasm” (60). He then enters the next phase of his initiation—“one of those hellishly intense introspection nightmares. Four hours of so of catatonic despair” (62).

Torture is also one of the neophyte’s experiences of initiatory death during his or her descent into the underworld. Not surprisingly, Duke and his attorney undergo severe ordeals of physical suffering designed to purge or purify the initiate. Appropriately, the form of ritual purification that Duke’s attorney experiences while he is being initiated into the mysteries of the Vegas food chain is vomiting. When Dr. Gonzo isn’t purging

his system of mescaline in the bathroom of his hotel room, he is “vomiting fairly regularly” as he and Duke are drag racing up and down the Strip (151). His attempts to initiate others into the secrets of America’s communal shadow are not successful precisely because of the horrific nature of his initiation: The “two hoggish looking couples” in “a big blue Ford with Oklahoma plates,” who find themselves next to the “white Cadillac convertible all covered with vomit and a 300-pound Samoan . . . yelling . . . ‘You folks want to buy some heroin,’” for instance, want nothing to do with Duke’s attorney or his offer to expand their consciousnesses (151). They leave him to do “the Big Spit again” by himself (153).

To the initiate of patriarchal mysteries, ritual purification is only one means of accessing the spiritual. Another is the experience of metaphoric Death: this experience not only includes that of self-sacrifice, but also the death of another. According to Eliade, those initiated into the patriarchal mysteries are not only the slayers of dragons and monsters, but also the killers of men (*Myths* 200). This experience is illustrated when Dr. Gonzo attempts to murder Duke in his hotel room after the “White Rabbit” experience. Confronted with the possibility of being dragged off to jail, however, the would-be Warrior Hero changes his mind and attempts to persuade Duke to undergo the less extreme expression of patriarchal passage, scarification. When Duke accuses Gonzo of trying to kill him, the attorney mumbles, “Who said anything about slicing you up? I just wanted to carve a little Z on your forehead—nothing serious” (61).

In the Gothic, the grotesque is pre-supposed to be aberrant. Ironically, in Gonzo journalism, the grotesque, and hence the aberrant, are revealed to be the norm. Towards the conclusion of their adventures, Duke and his attorney attend the *Third National Institute on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs* at the Flamingo Hilton. Rubbing shoulders with the “cop-cream from Middle America,” Dr. Gonzo is deeply shocked when he discovers that those who enforce society’s norms behave as outrageously as he does. He complains to Duke that “nice people” are looking and talking like caricatures. In essence, respectable policemen and undercover agents from Middle America are really “a gang of drunken pig farmers.” Dr. Gonzo groans, “I saw those bastards in *Easy Rider*, but I didn’t believe they were real. Not like this. Not hundreds of them” (140). Recognizing the grotesque to be a signature of the American Mid-West, he says, “This is a fucking nightmare” (141).

How Duke’s story is told is an important indicator of how unbalanced his personal and America’s psyches are. Gonzo journalism’s flamboyant, spontaneous, retrospective “do it now” style is the perfect hyperbolic vehicle for Thompson’s addled persona engaged in his psychic descent (12). Functioning on the level of his instincts, Duke begins to experience information instead of processing it rationally. The result is a collage of impressions. As Duke’s ability to create causal and chronological relationships disappears (a phenomenon well-known to anyone who has gambled in Las Vegas), the narrative sequence of his story falls apart. Anecdotes, paragraphs, and even sentences are left unfinished. The reader encounters fragmented jottings, material ripped from newspapers, and bits of press releases. Even the visual aids to the text, Ralph Steadman’s graphics, are out of the narrative’s control: they splatter themselves over the text, often dripping blobs of ink which partly obscure words on the following page. Finally, when the text and Duke’s intellect break down completely, the reader experiences the actual breakdown itself which is presented as a transcript of the muddled conversations that occurred during the narrator’s frenzied search for Paradise Boulevard

Sadly, Duke discovers that America is no longer the Eden on Earth that the Puritans believed it could be. Lou the Cook at Terry’s Taco Stand, USA, tells Duke that there

is “a place called the American Dream” on Paradise Boulevard (166). Also known as the “Old Psychiatrist’s Club” (167), it is “a mental joint,” Lou says, “where all the dope peddlers and all the pushers, everybody hangs out” (167). When Duke and his attorney find the address Lou gives them, all that remains of the American Dream is “a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds”: the Old Psychiatrist’s Club had “burned down about three years” before (168).

According to Eliade, the shaman is a healer and director of souls as well as a visionary and a mystic (*Myths* 61). By allowing others to see the failure of the Old Psychiatrist’s Club and the underside of the Dream, Raoul Duke acts as a mediator between the collective and the community, thereby fulfilling the essential role of the shaman as a healer. By the end of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, it is clear that drugs do not provide Americans with a way of transcending the condition of their culture, although they do provide the user with a way of encountering or making contact with the collective. Duke himself notes that the Acid Culture’s “fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning,” was derived from its knowledge that America had a problem. “[W]e had all the momentum, we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave,” Duke says. Experiencing the communal shadow individually, however, does not immediately admit one to the Club or correct a collective imbalance. Indeed, as Thompson points out in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*, recognizing the communal shadow does not necessarily mean that one’s psyche is automatically re-balanced, let alone the psyche of an entire culture. Those with him on the campaign trail in 1972 may notice that Thompson is sprouting claws, “but fuck them,” he says, “I am beginning to notice some of *their* problems, too” (220). Even in America, the land of the rugged individualist, the individual who has contacted the deeper layers of his or her culture’s psyche must return to the group and correct the communal imbalance by telling the tale to the collective before any change can occur.

Appropriately, the momentum of America’s youth culture which recognized its country’s problems in the Sixties foundered in the Nevada desert. Perhaps no statement so perfectly captures the tragedy of the Acid Culture as Duke’s elegiac comment, “So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back” (68). As Duke notes, acid freaks throughout the United States made the mistake of thinking they, as individuals, could “buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit” (178). Listening to Tim Leary was a mistake, Duke explains, because he “crashed around America selling ‘consciousness expansion’ without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously” (178). Not surprisingly, in 1970 America’s emphasis on individuality and ego-consciousness ensured that its communal consciousness still had not recognized the terrible truth about itself, because the country was “[s]till humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino” (57).

Finally, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, like a resurrected shaman, Duke returns to ego-consciousness and recounts his experiences in a retrospective narrative. Told in the historical present, shamanistic accounts use grotesque metaphors and exaggerated prose to re-create their protagonists’ psychic descents, whereby the reader too is able to experience the underside of consciousness. Considering the negative nature of the collective in this text, a mediator between it and the general public is undoubtedly a good thing. After all, at the end of his journey, Thompson’s protagonist is

has become precisely that which earlier appalled him. Ironically, after two big hits of amyl, Dr. Duke becomes like Leary, “a certified Minister of the Church of the New Truth” (203); moreover, he morphs into a grotesque caricature of the average American participating in the Dream, “a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger . . . a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident” (204). Nonetheless, by encountering and uncovering the communal shadow, the Gonzo journalist protects what Eliade terms the community’s psychic integrity (*Shamanism* 509). Because this shadow has been revealed, Duke’s story is an act of healing, if not for himself, then certainly for his audience. As Jung points out, recognizing the shadow provides the onlooker with “psychic immunity . . . to any moral and mental infection and insinuation” (*Unconscious* 73). Thus, even though Duke, a “Doctor of Divinity” (203), appears to have succumbed to the collective infection that he endeavored to cure, we, as readers, are safe because we have heard and understood his tale. However, should our fingernails and toenails begin to grow at unusual rates at any time in the future, the Doctor’s story should be read again, twice a day, until whatever bad craziness is erupting has been corrected. As Thompson’s tragic suicide on February 20, 2005, suggests, an ounce of compensation is a more preferable solution to the monsters that haunt the American psyche than a pound of the cure.

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Endnotes

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1. For example, Bruce-Novoa argues that Thompson’s use of hyperbole and grotesque exaggeration, which expresses the author’s extreme bitterness about the distortion that the Dream has suffered, is Thompson’s “alternative to armed revolution, a literary Molotov cocktail”

(40); Matt Johnson begins his article by noting that Thompson's outrageous and excessive behavior is designed to challenge the "existence of conservative traditions followed blindly by the public toward which no attempts at reform have ever been offered" (65); Edward Parkinson points out that Raoul Duke's grotesque and antic behavior, like Hamlet's, is that character's way of acting out an insane world's "neurosis and corruption" (34). As well, Daniel Grassian investigates Thompson's use of the monstrous to deconstruct traditional notions of American male heroism and ideology and challenge "our sense of reality in postmodern society" in "The Half-baked cultural Detective: Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas as Postmodern Noir" (99, 106); Brandon Hall examines Thompson's hyperbole as "the sort of description that makes more famous Thompson characters in loathsome . . . in an almost mythically aesthetic way" in "Teeth Like Baseballs" (49); in "A Counterculture *Gatsby*: Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the Death of the American Dream and the Rise of Las Vegas, USA," Robert T. Sickels notes that "*Fear and Loathing* is in some ways a nonstop burlesque of the American Dream" (63).