Final Essay

You must produce a final essay (2,500-3,000 words) on a topic having to do with the course. The essay must articulate and defend a position on a issue relevant to one or more of the works we have discussed, and it must feature research into secondary source materials. The essay must have an arguable thesis statement, stated positively at the end of its introductory paragraph. It must follow current MLA guidelines for form and citations. The essay will be evaluated on the strength of its argument, the logical use of evidence, the use of formal diction appropriate to the level of the course, and the grammatical correctness of its sentences. Students may write on a topic of their own choosing, or they may select one of the following prompts as the basis of their discussion:

One of the features of postmodern literature is its constant questioning and undermining of authoritative truth claims. Discuss the problematics of authority and truth claims in one or more of the novels discussed this term.

Thesis:

The depiction of authority and truth claims in *Armies of the Night* serve as an allegory for the emerging counter-culture movement spurred by the March on the Pentagon.

**Intro**

Mailer’s novel, *The Armies of the Night* maintains significance for its postmodernist features that seek to undermine authoritative truth claims. Catalyzed by its historical moment, the novel echoes the voice of America’s growing counter-culture movement of the 1960’s. This essay will affirm that one of the post-modernist features of *The Armies of the Night* is that it seeks to undermine authoritative truth claims while demonstrating that these depictions symbolize the emerging counter-culture movement of the 1960’s to then become an act of defiance itself.

The year 1967 was the one in which Time magazine first identified –or classified – the “hippie.” It had begun with a mass counterculture celebration, the “Human Be-In” in the Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, followed by the “Summer of Love” that focused on the city’s Haight-Ashbury district. In other cities, notably Boston, Detroit, and Newark, love was in rather short supply, and race riots had to be quelled by the National Guard, which prompted Newsweek to rebrand the “Summer of Love” the “Summer of Discontent.” October saw “Stop the Draft Week” followed by the antiwar March on the Pentagon, the inspiration for author and journalist Norman Mailer’s meditation on literature, history, and Mailer *– The Armies of the Night* (Grant 360).

Grant’s words on the year 1967 set the stage for the historical moment captured by *The Armies of the Night*. The event of the March on the Pentagon is symbolic of youthful disdain at the U.S. Government’s escalation of the Vietnam conflict. The emerging counter culture movement is built on these symbolic battles; battles fought with symbols, images and propaganda like a cold war. These symbols are artifacts of the dueling factions and *The Armies of the Night* replaces warriors with these symbols. The following section will discuss these while asserting that the overarching authoritative truth claim that the novel jousts (or jests) with is that the war in Vietnam is completely necessary despite being messy.

To elicit the overarching authoritative truth claim discussed in the novel, it is important to examine the factions that are also present. Mailer’s narrative includes a helpful metaphor of the opposing ideologies as “Hawks and Doves” (Mailer). The Hawks are described as:

All the healthy Marines, state troopers, professional athletes, movie stars, rednecks, sensuous life-loving Mafia, cops, mill workers, city officials, nice healthy-looking easy-grafting politicians full of the light in their eye of a life they enjoy—yes they would be for the war in Vietnam (Mailer 34).

With their position as anchors of the American status quo and thus support of the war is foiled by their rivals, the Doves:

Arrayed against them as hardcore troops: an elite! the Freud-ridden embers of Marxism, good old American anxiety strata—the urban middle-class with their proliferated monumental adenoidal resentments, their secret slavish love for the incoming hegemony of the computer and the suburb, yes, they and their children, by the sheer ironies, the sheer ineptitude, the kinks of history, were now being compressed into more and more militant stands, their resistance to the war some hopeless mélange, somehow firmed , of Pacifism and closet Communism. And their children—on a freak-out from the suburbs to a love-in on the Pentagon wall (Mailer 34).

These children compose the titular Armies of the Night. Their anxieties and discontentment with the ideals of the Hawks reflects the nature of Mailer’s quest to undermine and question authoritative truth.

The dichotomous relationship between culture and counter-culture or “Hawks and Doves” constructs what Andrew Wilson calls a “Civil War motif” that “symbolizes the tenuous state if the union in 1967” (727). Moreover, Wilson remarks that the Civil War motif further has “aesthetic virtue” in that “Mailer can mythologize the march, even suggest a sepia-reddish tone to its blander aspects” (727). This is a significant feature of Mailer’s postmodern narrative framework: it is framed as it is told by Norman Mailer, the investigative journalist and Norman Mailer, the novelist. In his chapter of *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature,* David Shumway’s summary of the postmodernist practice of “New Journalism” provides insight as to how *The Armies of the Night* seeks to undermine authoritative truth claims:

Another example of the rejection of objective knowledge was the New Journalism, which Fredric Jameson has called “one of the varieties of postmodernism.”31 The New Journalism was both an expression of the counterculture and one of the chief means by which news of its existence was disseminated. As practiced by Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion among others, the New Journalism combined factual reporting with techniques borrowed from fiction.32 It often foregrounded the personality of the journalist, giving the form a distinctly subjective cast. It is evidence of this form’s postmodernism that it was largely the work of conservatives who, whatever their fascination with the counterculture, were certainly not of it or sympathetic to its transformational dreams. In the long run, it contributed to the growing skepticism about the objectivity of any news source, a skepticism that while it was first expressed on the Left, was soon exploited by the Right.

Mailer, a consciously “Left Conservative” and clearly “fascinated with counter-culture”, seeks to undermine authoritative truth claims by

Thus, the novel itself can be construed as a manifestation of Mailer’s postmodern skepticism (Shumway).

Beyond the dichotomy of Hawks and Doves, *The Armies of the Night* captures a series of moments that symbolize an emergent counter-culture. Wilson likens Mailer’s novel to a series of photographs: “*The Armies of the Night* has a photographic aspect, a series of pictures shot through with commentary from the novelist” (727). These pictures, or images present a journalistic view of emergent counter-culture which Grant summarizes here:

Individually, each reform agenda, be it focused on gender, race, sexuality, the environment, politics, or foreign policy, had a potential impact in its own sphere, but the 1960s witnessed a confluence of what might otherwise have been conflicting, or at least competing, agendas that loosely connected in what became known as the “counterculture.” (Grant 359).

The loosely connected factions that culminate to form the emergent counterculture are then captured by Mailer’s narrative lens. The narrational images of the Doves in action correspond to symbols of warriors, for they merely present an image of defiance. Mailer’s position as narrator and journalist capitalizes on these symbols of defiance to effectively manifest the collection of symbols (the novel) as an act of defiance.

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In chapter 5, Mailer divulges the dichotomy of opposition between authoritative and rebellious groups. He applies the symbolism of Hawks versus Doves to convey an inherently unbalanced nature between the two groups while simultaneously implying that the rebels are the underdogs.

It was the children in whom Mailer had some hope, a gloomy hope. These middle-class children with their lobotomies from sin, their nihilistic embezzlement of all middle-class moral funds, their innocence, their lust for apocalypse, their unbelievable indifference to waste: twenty generations of buried hopes perhaps engraved in their chromosomes, and now conceivably burning like faggots in the secret inquisitional fires of LSD (Mailer 34).

Yes, these were the troops: middle-class cancer-pushers and drug-gutted flower children (Mailer 35).

Arguably, Mailer’s novel serves as a manifestation of counterculture.

**Allegorical analysis**

**Conclusion**

Problematics of authority and truth claims in Armies of the Night

* novel appears to undermine reader’s expectations of narrative
* authority is challenged
* authority is biased
* truth claims often in servitude of someone’s agenda
* hard to invalidate authoritative truths
* authority typically means power
* counterculture

Sources

1. WILSON, ANDREW. “Pentagon Pictures: The Civil Divide in Norman Mailer's The Armies of the Night.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2010, pp. 725–740., doi:10.1017/S0021875809991319.

The Armies of the Night (1968) is part of a spirit of resistance that turned to symbolic, imaginative and theatrical displays for the benefit of audiences across the country (Andrew 726).

Photographic imagery began to play more of a role in ‘‘narrating’’ the Vietnam War: pictures took precedence over print, hastening Mailer’s unease with literature and his gravitation to filmmaking and theatre productions of The Deer Park in the year of the march (Andrew 727).

If Mailer’s true-life story The Executioner’s Song (1979) has a cinematic quality, The Armies of the Night has a photographic aspect, a series of pictures shot through with commentary from the novelist (Andrew 727).

The Civil War motif in The Armies of the Night, discussed in due course, symbolizes the tenuous state of the union in 1967, but it also has an aesthetic virtue ; Mailer can mythologize the march, even suggest a sepia-reddish tone to its blander aspects.

1. Manso, Peter. Mailer: His Life and Times. New York: Washington Square, 2008. Print.
   1. "Mailer thinks he's a great rebel. But I believe that if I reviewed the whole postwar history, I'd find that he's riding the waves exactly like a surfboard. It's fashion and show biz" (Manso 650).
2. Grant, Susan-Mary. “Armies of the Night: Counterculture and Counterrevolution.” *A Concise History of the United States of America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 346–380. Cambridge Concise Histories.
   1. Johnson knew, as he advised the then-Democratic Whip in the Senate and his future vice president, Hubert Humphrey, that he had to make the Civil Rights Act “an American bill and not just a Democratic bill.” Even as it passed, however, Johnson feared that in this he had failed. As he observed to his then aide, Bill Moyers, “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come.” (347).
   2. The summer of 1964 witnessed more violent clashes between civil rights activists and southern segregationists in Mississippi (347).
   3. The bombings and beatings were the least of it; some two dozen activists were murdered in the cause of civil rights in the South in the period between Kennedy’s election and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (347)
   4. By the dawn of the 1960s, America could no longer avoid foreign involvement, but the threat of the nation being undermined from within, whether by forces antithetical to the American creed, such as communism, or by those rather too rigorously dedicated to its protection and through it their own aggrandizement,remained a risk (354).
   5. Hyped to within an inch of its life at the time, it is hardly surprising that the decade of the 1960s seemed, with hindsight, to have somehow fallen short of those ideals identified with it (357).
   6. What was perceived as radical, at the time and since, relied to a great extent on oppositional forces that did not grow out of the war but were intensified both by it and by the broader cultural context of the Western world as a whole at this time. The soundtrack both to Johnson’s election in 1964 and the escalation of the war in 1965 was provided by bands that seemed to exemplify rebellious (although financially astute) youth; both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones toured America for the first time in 1964, and the hysteria their appearance produced seemed to set the tone for a generation prone to such out burstson matters musical and moral (357).
   7. How that idea played out with the generation that witnessed firsthand the results of the “Final Solution” or fought in Korea may not be hard to imagine, especially given that in the early years of the Vietnam conflict it was America’s youth, and not its parents, who supported the war most strongly. With only one-tenth of 1 percent of the population as a whole demonstrably opposing the war in its early stages, hostility to military involvement in Vietnam was, initially, a minority position. In this respect, the antiwar movement bears comparison with the abolition movement of the nineteenth century. Both were fringe movements driven by a moral imperative that became mass movements as the political, cultural, and military context shifted. For the Civil War generation, the shift had been toward a war that began “a new birth of freedom.” For the Vietnam generation, the shift had taken them closer to that freedom promised a century before, and away from war (358).
   8. Individually, each reform agenda, be it focused on gender, race, sexuality, the environment, politics, or foreign policy, had a potential impact in its own sphere, but the 1960s witnessed a confluence of what might otherwise have been conflicting, or at least competing, agendas that loosely connected in what became known as the “counterculture.” The counterculture was far from a coherent movement; indeed, elements of it were very far from coherent, period, but it did posit a sustained and multifaceted challenge not to the American creed, but to the inadequacies of its implementation. The counterculture, too, was aimed at the creation of a “Great Society,” if not quite in the way Johnson had in mind. Not everyone involved in the counterculture would necessarily have seen it this way at the time (359).
   9. The year 1967 was the one in which Time magazine first identified –or classified – the “hippie.” It had begun with a mass counterculture celebration, the “Human Be-In” in the Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, followed by the “Summer of Love” that focused on the city’s Haight-Ashbury district. In other cities, notably Boston, Detroit, and Newark, love was in rather short supply, and race riots had to be quelled by the National Guard (Figure 11.3), which prompted Newsweek to rebrand the “Summer of Love” the “Summer of Discontent.” October saw “Stop the Draft Week” followed by the antiwar March on the Pentagon, the inspiration for author and journalist Norman Mailer’s meditation on literature, history, and Mailer – The Armies of the Night (1968) – but again, the impact of the demonstration was perhaps disproportionate to its media image: at the end of that year, 70 percent of Americans expressed their disapproval of antiwar demonstrations, at least to the Harris Poll (360).
3. Shumway, David R. “Countercultures.” *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, edited by Brian McHale and Len Platt, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, pp. 112–126.

Another example of the rejection of objective knowledge was the New Journalism, which Fredric Jameson has called “one of the varieties of postmodernism.”31 The New Journalism was both an expression of the counterculture and one of the chief means by which news of its existence was disseminated. As practiced by Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion among others, the New Journalism combined factual reporting with techniques borrowed from fiction.32 It often foregrounded the personality of the journalist, giving the form a distinctly subjective cast. It is evidence of this form’s postmodernism that it was largely the work of conservatives who, whatever their fascination with the counterculture, were certainly not of it or sympathetic to its transformational dreams. In the long run, it contributed to the growing skepticism about the objectivity of any news source, a skepticism that while it was first expressed on the Left, was soon exploited by the Right.