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**

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 (1968) (Grant 360).

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 the postmodernist features of *The Armies of the Night* seek to undermine authoritative truth claims while demonstrating that these depictions serve as an allegory for the emerging counter-culture movement.

**Depictions of authority and truth claims in Armies of the Night**

**Emerging counter-culture movement**

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).

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**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.
2. 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).
3. 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).