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ENGL 338

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Final Essay

10 December 2021

Hawks and Doves: Unreal Rebellions and Hegemonic Criticism in *The Armies of the Night*

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 by symbolically capturing the emerging counter-culture movement of the 1960’s to then become an act of defiance itself. It will then conclude with a deconstruction of this claim that analyzes the novel’s theme of criticizing American cultural hegemony.

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).

Susan-Mary 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 felt on behalf of the United States Government 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 physical warriors with symbolic imagery. The following section will discuss these symbols 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. Incidentally, this examination will reveal the groundwork for discussing the symbolization of Mailer’s narrative imagery. Mailer’s narrative includes a helpful metaphor of the opposing ideologies as “Hawks and Doves” (34). 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).

The Hawks are effectively examples of the American cultural hegemony. Their position as anchors of the American status quo and thus supporters of the Vietnam 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 metaphor of Hawks and Doves represents two inverse factions. There is the authoritative power and those who challenge its hegemony. The Hawks reflect the face of culture where the Doves embody its counter-culture.

This counter-culture is captured by Mailer’s narrative imagery. Or, as Wilson argues, the novel is a series of pictures: “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 the non-fictional 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; warriors fighting the power. Here, Mailer admires the warriors:

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… these were the troops: middle class cancer-pushers and drug-gutted flower children (Mailer 34-35).

These images are peppered throughout *The Armies of the Night* and Mailer even embodies the position of the symbolic warrior when he decides to get arrested:

‘let’s get arrested now’… ‘if we’re going to, shall we get away from here? I don’t see any good that’s accomplished if we’re all picked up right next to a Vietcong flag’… it was difficult enough for people to take [Mailer] seriously without standing next to *that* flag (Mailer 128).

However, Mailer’s status as a warrior is much less tragic than the “flower children”. Mailer construes the true warriors as symbols through narration while imagining himself as a symbolic warrior; engaging in defiance only when it can be taken seriously. Where the Doves are flexible, Mailer is constrained by his “Left Conservativeness”, he “[has] his own point of view” (185). To him, the tug of war between the two factions is trivial in that, “the Hawks [are] smug and self-righteous, and the Doves [are] evasive of the real question” (184). Mailer maintains a unique political ideology that thrusts him consciously between Hawks and Doves.

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. Not only does Mailer have the ability and privilege to capture the ideological battle between Hawks and Doves, he can at the same time aestheticize the battle with clever metaphors. The journalistic nature and privileges of Mailer’s narration are made possible by his choice of narrative framework. In the chapter entitled “Counter Cultures” from *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 (121).

Mailer, a consciously “Left Conservative” and clearly “fascinated with counter-culture”, seeks to undermine authoritative truth claims with postmodern skepticism embedded in *The Armies of the Night*’s narrative framework while remaining as objective as possible. Which, according to his self-proclaimed “left Conservativism” arguably situates him in between the competing ideologies and thus awards him an objective stance. Moreover, the novel itself can be construed as a manifestation of Mailer’s postmodern skepticism because of its qualities of “New Journalism” (Shumway 121).

As a manifestation of postmodern skepticism, the novel signifies Mailer’s intent to not only undermine the authoritative support for the war in Vietnam, but also to capture acts of defiance. The novel’s “aesthetic virtue” is thus because of its obsession with counter-culture. This obsession in conjunction with Mailer’s own stance on the tensions at hand forms the basis for the novel’s symbolic capturing of the counter-culture movement. As Mailer and Robert Lowell walk in the “barrage of cameras helicopters, TV cars, monitors, loudspeakers, and wavering buckling twisting line of notables arms linked…” Mailer’s words here signify that his and Lowell’s presence has weight to it (113). Mailer’s decision to get arrested perpetuates this same degree of showmanship; that he must look the part in order to get his point across: “Mailer recognizes the value of his own and Robert Lowell’s public image and exploits their worth: it is memorable in as far as any meeting of celebrated writers has an interest to readers” Wilson (728). Wilson additionally conveys the superficial nature of this stunt, “for aesthetic gain, Mailer’s arrest is noted; he alone is pictured on the lawns outside the Pentagon, crossing ropes sealing off the crowds, running past a line of MPs before being wrestled to the floor” (729). Given these examples and Wilson’s criticism, it becomes evident that Mailer’s narrative lens transposes the position of warriors with symbols of acts 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 against any authority.

The novel’s existence as an act of defiance in and of itself presents a few questions. For instance, what does Mailer have to gain from challenging cultural hegemony? Why does he do so? To entertain these questions, it is important to revisit Mailer’s self-proclaimed status as a “Left Conservative” (184). The novel as an act of defiance is beneficial to Mailer for, he can profit on a number of levels from socially to financially by tossing his symbolic weight around. Peter Manso’s autobiography on Mailer says so succinctly: “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” (650). Taking Manso’s words into consideration, Mailer certainly positions himself as a rebel in *The Armies of the Night*, but does he truly oppose the war in Vietnam? Part of the answer can be attributed to a criticism of the American cultural hegemon of the era. Another aspect, and a potentially more convincing one is that Mailer needed an avenue to divulge his “Left Conservative” thesis.

The essay thus far has demonstrated how *Armies of the Night* symbolically captures the emerging counter-culture movement of the 1960’s to then become an act of defiance itself. This section will question why Mailer divulged this work of defiance. As previously stated, it is worthwhile to prod Mailer’s stance as a “Left Conservative” and the implications of this position. In this point of view, Mailer “had come to decide that the center of America might be insane. The country had been living with a controlled, even fiercely controlled schizophrenia…” (188). The schizophrenia mentioned here points to the tragically hypocritical state of the middle-class American Christian—America’s cultural hegemon—where “the average American believed in two opposites more profoundly apart than any previous schism in the Christian soul” (188). The war in Vietnam becomes necessary as a distraction from this circumstance: “the foul brutalities of the war in Vietnam were the only temporary cure possible” (188). These words arguably define Mailer’s moral behind *The Armies of the Night* which is to expose the fragmented state of America’s cultural hegemon. Its graphic narrative descriptions present themselves similarly to in-your-face-journalism. It symbolizes rebellion without actually being rebellious, for Mailer himself does not elicit his private opinions publicly unless they can elevate his image as a liberal academic. If anything, the uneasy sentiments of *The Armies of the Night* are evoked by Wilson: “beyond every other distinction, America is defined as a fiction, an abstract country of unreal experience, where wars are witnessed on television and read via newsprint” (732).

Though *Armies of the Night* curates a performative and symbolic message on the war in Vietnam and the two sides that are either for and against it, the novel maintains within it a noble endeavor to criticize any notion that the arguments for and against are anything but simple. If anything, the complexity of the factions and their flexibility during wartime (to come together against each other) echoes an aversion of reality and fixation on distractions. Perhaps its narrative form is the only way Mailer’s ‘middle-of-the-road’ moral could be communicated effectively. What about Mailer’s words in 1968 hold true today? What experiences are real and which ones are fictional and abstract? Perhaps the crux of the novel is to ponder this question.

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