Existentialism And Racial Masculinity in Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*

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Abstract

Norman Mailer reflects on Ernest Hemingway's impact on his own writing in *Advertisements for Myself*, a compilation of quotes and essays. Even so, he recognizes that he has a deep-seated respect for his literary forebear and that Hemingway accomplished many things that few of us could. Mailer also believes that the author "pretended to be ignorant of the notion that it is not enough to feel like a man; one must try to think like a man as well" (20). Although this assessment of Hemingway is open to criticism, the statement's significance for a study of Mailer's writings lies more in its intention than in its accuracy since, by expressing this concern, Mailer implies that he will not pretend to ignore this problem. Indeed, Mailer devotes a significant portion of his writing career to examining what it means to "think like a man." Even though Mailer's portrayal of masculinity is contentious because it relies on a variety of violent forms, including political, misogynistic, and interpersonal violence, it does run the risk of legitimizing many of the repressive social structures that Mailer and his characters find so confining. Nevertheless, his body of work provides important insight into common problems of conflicted gendered identity in American culture. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the sometimes disregarded nuanced aspects of some of Mailer's most notorious depictions of masculinity. To be more precise, I look at how Mailer's portrayals of masculinity paradoxically uphold the oppressions he aims to subvert through the violent uprisings of his protagonists, as well as the instances in which Mailer questions these acts of violence and how they form gender identity.

Key words: Existentialism, Race, Masculinity, Violence, Liberation, Society, Good, and Evil.

Introduction

Mailer's thoughts on masculinity center on an existential apprehension among what he consistently describes as a deteriorating or malignant society. Although he is sometimes criticized as a reactionary, anti-feminist author, I would argue that Mailer takes a project quite similar to Simone de Beauvoir's existential theory, which also borrows from the principles of French existentialism. According to his early writings, there are two main points of agreement between his concept of existentialism and those of Sartre and Beauvoir. The two works that most clearly illustrate the relationships between existentialism, violence, and masculinity that run throughout Mailer's novel *An American Dream* (1965) center on these existential themes.

Degradation in Society

In *An American Dream*, Mailer creates characters who express a feeling of being trapped in a stale scenario, which is frequently characterized by death and decay. Mailer portrays this degradation as the result of a society that is becoming more dictatorial and imposing conformity, which is similar to Beauvoir's existential discussion of immanence. Man's immanence is linked to totalitarian oppression in Mailer's terminology, and the ultimate goal of man's existential journey is transcendent liberty, which would enable him to leave this repressive society and identify as an "outlaw." Both the fictitious "sexual outlaw" and the morally dubious character utilize the existential language of transcendence in their frequent allusions to a way out of this conformity. Stephen Rojack *An American Dream* works to fashion a more expansive definition of masculinity that does convention. In addition, a male protagonist's fear of being defined by his shortcomings forms the basis of much of Mailer's vision of existential masculinity in An American Dream. This theme is further enhanced by Mailer's obsession with an "other" as a crucial component in the creation of a free masculine identity. The character of Stephen Rojack and Mailer's persona creations are based on a simultaneous tension and identification with a racial or female other, echoing Beauvoir's parallels between Blacks, Jews, and women in America. In other words, although the protagonist recognizes aspects of himself in these people, he also worries that they would jeopardize his own masculine authority or strength. Thus, the masculine identity of each character comes to rely on either an approximation of the other's identity or a complete eradication of the other's threat. But in some respects, Mailer's existentialism is just as fascinating for the ways it differs from Beauvoir and Sartre as it is for the ways it is similar. His own understanding of existentialism, for instance, is based less on overt philosophical or ideological tenets and more on mysticism and intuition. According to Mailer, existentialism is a conflict between good and evil as well as

between immanence and transcendence. In contrast to Sartre's own atheistic existentialism, he argues that in order to be a "real" existentialist, one must "be religious" and possess a sense of purpose based on an understanding of heaven and hell, a meaningful but enigmatic conclusion. All things considered, Mailer incorporates many of the core ideas of existential theory advanced by some of the leading existential theorists, but he also identifies the points at which these ideas depart from his own. For Mailer, these "psychic maps" include a more embattled vision of existential philosophy that includes references to God and the devil, as well as an investment in the possibility of magic and mysticism. As J. Michael Lennon in *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* has noted, Mailer believed that his unique brand of religious existentialism offered the possibility of "spiritual transcendence" (203), something that was lacking from traditional American and European existentialism.

Treatment of Existential Violence

Regardless of these differing readings, his treatment of existential violence reveals the fundamental parallels between his own existential premises and those of the French existentialists whose work he draws upon. Both Mailer and Sartre believe that political and interpersonal violence are infused with positively charged revolutionary and liberatory aspects, which makes these similarities especially clear when comparing their ideologies. For example, Sartre contended in his well-known introduction to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that "at the individual level, violence is a cleansing force" (51) that has the capacity to liberate individuals from oppression and subjugation. According to Sartre, violence has the capacity to be redeemed. In a similar vein, Mailer sees individual violence as a tool that can release men from the prospect of totalitarian rule and help them regain their damaged male identities. According to Mailer in *The Presidential Papers*, for example, in a 1964 interview with W.J. Weather for *Twentieth Century*, individual violence is a necessary reaction to a potential "extinction of possibilities" (28) that our surroundings may bring to us. He goes on to say that people who are ignorant of existential experience are unable to comprehend the complexity of violence, but for those who do, violence can provide both revelation and freedom. "When violence is larger than one's ability to dominate," he notes, "it is existential and one is living in an instantaneous world of revelations" (30). As a result, Mailer offers a picture of a certain kind of existential violence that could influence how people live and perceive the world. Furthermore, Mailer views violence as a badge of pride or bravery, which is a longtime tenet of his own notion of masculinity, in addition to providing the potential for purification or healing.

Interpersonal Violence

There are issues with this view of interpersonal violence as philosophically liberating. Nevertheless, Mailer himself struggles with the harsh macho ethic he has established in books such as *An American Dream*. By contrasting Mailer's portrayal of violence as an essential symbol of masculinity with Hannah Arendt's criticism of violence as a means of violently maintaining authority, it is possible to shed light on the intricacy and occasionally ambivalence inherent in his ideas. For instance, Mailer and Arendt in *On Violence* would probably concur that, although violence is occasionally a necessary weapon for achieving justice, some forms of violence are more frequently used as "successful techniques of social control" (19) than for social justice. In the political sphere, violence often becomes "nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power" (35). In other words, although Mailer obviously believes in the potential of violence, his works—both fictional and non-fiction—also seem to indicate that, like Arendt, he recognizes the harm that violence can cause, particularly when it is employed by governments as a tool of totalitarian control. Although his ethic of violent masculinity is controversial and problematic, it should be noted that Mailer's own commitment to the dialectical nature of these issues is reflected in this type of critique, as well as the associated ambivalences surrounding the relationship between gender and violence, which are frequently overlooked in his fiction.

Misogynistic Ideologies

Mailer's critical tone does not always negate the fact that he has crafted characters whose actions embody racist and misogynistic ideologies. Although he does not implicitly support violence, Mailer does accept some forms of violence as the sole means of escaping the dictatorial society he observes in his surroundings. By doing so, he reenacts new cycles of oppression through his writing, threatening to continue what Arendt calls the "instinct of domination" (36) that is inextricably linked to violence. Accordingly, Mailer consistently opposes what Arendt subsequently highlights, which is that violence leads to "impotence" when it is perceived as a way of life rather than just a means to a goal (54). On the contrary, Mailer frequently defines violence as a means of transcendence rather than immanence (or, for that matter, impotence) and as an intrinsic component of masculine identity. The violent scenes in Mailer's fiction show that, despite his efforts to create a different kind of manhood outside of the oppressive society he observes, he ultimately participates in its violence by essentially reproducing on a personal level the violence he denounces on a societal level.

Therefore, the issue with Mailer's attempt to create a masculine ethic based on the traits of an existential outlaw is that, although his protagonists' initial intentions may be libratory and equalizing, and although he may have explored the effects of violence more than is often acknowledged in *The Presidential Papers*, the violent methods by which his protagonists achieve liberation actually serve to reestablish oppressive racial and gendered stereotypes, effectively re-submerging the "submerged classes" (146) and the people that Mailer is trying to free. Furthermore, Mailer highlights the strength inherent in a violent display of masculinity through his protagonists. Not only does Mailer examine the subtleties and repercussions of different forms of violence, but he also does not make this claim without challenge. Despite the existential principles he adopts from Beauvoir, Mailer often appears to reinforce some of the gender stereotypes that she herself seeks to dispel because the language of liberation he employs only frees his protagonists in the end. "It is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills," states Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (68).

Beauvoir draws on a point that Mailer will make a major component of his theory of masculinity in his theory of why men are socially superior to women: the significance of violence and risk-taking in the formation of a strong, independent personality. Mailer celebrates violence in several of his works and discusses the need for danger. Indeed, Philip Bufithis makes the claim that "each of Mailer's subsequent protagonists in his novels is emotionally (though not factually) autobiographical and modeled on the hipster delineated in this essay" (59) in Norman Mailer. As previously explained by Mailer in a 1955 column for *The Village Voice*, the "hipster" is the American existentialist who rejects the totalitarian conformity of American society and lives among "the defeated, the isolated, the violent, the tortured, and the warped" in "the undercurrents and underworlds of American life" (314).

Violence is an Essential Instrument.

For Mailer, the notion that violence is an essential instrument for emancipation from a conformist culture is also the basis for the image of the "psychopathic" hipster. To accept violence as a natural component of one's liberation is to support one's inner psychopath. As stated by Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself*:
Hip, which would return us to ourselves, no matter what the price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the violence of the State; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis that prepares growth. (355)
Mailer alludes to Sartre's contention that violence can promote liberty in addition to Beauvoir's call for freedom in this portrayal of the hipster. In a world where civilization is based on the "cultureless and alienated bottom of exploitable human material," Mailer discovers that violence has the capacity to be creative and fruitful. In actuality, violence is not only portrayed as necessary for breaking free from conformity but also as a means of eliminating or at least lessening violence. According to Mailer, "the psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of necessity to purge his violence, because if he cannot empty his hatred before he can love, his being is frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice" (347). Therefore, according to Mailer, violence is employed as a means of eradicating violence—another apparent contradiction. Both the violence and the hipster's persona are distinctly "masculine" in this setting. Although they appear to be exclusive to men, existential freedom and a theory of hip are both essential components of Mailer's philosophy of masculinity during this period. Mailer refers to his work in *Advertisements for Myself* as a "masculine argument," one that should be distinguished from that of the "mystic," which even Beauvoir points out is frequently connected to the feminine. According to him, losing control of oneself or "goofing" on the path to existential liberation actually means "revealing the buried, weaker, more feminine part of your nature" (351). We can get a hint of the issues that would emerge from the inherent exclusivity of a philosophy that first tries to ground itself in a notion of liberation as Mailer resorts to this oversimplified gender distinction, as his liberatory goals are reduced to one gender.

Heinous and Unforgivable Cases

Mailer's notion of liberation is problematic not only because it is exclusive to men but also because, at least in his early theorizing, it depends on the use of violence that oppresses others, making any "liberation" conceivable exclusively for the male aggressor. Although Mailer would go into further detail later on about the effects of interpersonal violence, his remarks at this stage of his career are far more extreme—almost sensationalist. For example, Mailer claims in *Advertisement for Myself*, an essay published in the *Village Voice* in 1955, that "to a Square, a rapist is a rapist…However, a hipster is aware that rape is a part of life as well and that, even in the most heinous and unforgivable cases, there is either artistry or the absence of it. Therefore, no two rapists or rapes are ever the same (314). Given its moral relativism and seeming acceptance of sexual and frequently gender-based, misogynistic violence, this idea that there are acceptable or "artistic" forms of rape poses a serious danger to Mailer's thesis. The Hip "morality," as defined

by Mailer, is, in fact, "to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible" (354). This sounds awfully similar to amorality. Additionally, the claim that rape "is a part of life" highlights a fundamental flaw in Mailer's theory of violence, which Hannah Arendt later outlines in *On Violence*: when one attempts to find a "method for living and acting" in violence, it becomes "irrational" (66). However, for Mailer, the idea that violence not only is a method for living but that it actually must be so is a fundamental component of his concept of liberated masculine identity. Its irrationality, however, stems from Mailer's attempt to make violence an intrinsic component of freedom by equating an act that injures another with an act of development and emancipation. Even while Mailer's hipster may get catharsis and a sense of freedom from this deed, it still occurs at the expense of someone else whose freedom is consequently suspended.

As part of his theory of masculinity in *An American Dream*, Mailer envisions a freed man in the future who would take the place of the oppressed Black man in America. This aspect of Mailer's theory is based on his conviction that, since "he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries," the Black man in America occupies a kind of liminal space (340). Mailer views the Black man in America as an ideal representation of the sexual and moral outlaw he imagines, a man "forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or morbid or self-destructive or corrupt" (348). This is because he sees the Black man in America through the lens of the stereotype that was prevalent at the time—a hyper sexualized, violent, and criminalized figure. Mailer claims that this hyper sexualized hipster is looking for an "apocalyptic orgasm" that will release him from social constraints and enable him to serve as a symbol of a new period where rebellion will take the place of conformity, which he believes to be even more harmful than violence. The hipster's racialization also leads to a number of challenges that foreshadow those in *An American Dream*. The most evident of these is that Mailer runs the risk of reinforcing racial notions of the increased sexuality and crime frequently associated with Blacks by presenting an ideal male character who abides by what he refers to as a "Black man's code." In his 1961 piece for *Esquire* titled "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," James Baldwin also addressed this issue. Baldwin recognizes there:

To be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol, which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others. The relationship, therefore, of a Black boy to a white boy is a very complex thing. (270)

Baldwin believes that Mailer does not fully capture this complexity, pushing the sexualized Black man image to the point where "the mystique could only be extended into violence" (277). To put it another way, Baldwin charges Mailer with sustaining the myths that shape societal perceptions of Black manhood, adding to the "mystique" surrounding the Black man and making him even more different. By mythicizing the Black man into a category outside of society and thereby taking away some of his agency, Mailer ends up perpetuating the same kind of repressive mindset that Beauvoir condemns in *The Second Sex*; he becomes the one who "limits and denies" (147).

Conclusion

It is even more crucial to take into account Mailer's differentiation between human and inhuman violence, or between mass violence that is merely "aesthetic" (i.e., a display of power or authority) and individual violence that is required or justified by its capacity for revolution, liberation, and creativity. These distinctions are essential to comprehending how violence is used in An American Dream, a book that undoubtedly still demonstrates the "obsession with violence" that Mailer himself speaks of. In that book, Mailer uses a succession of violent incidents to show how his protagonist's masculinity develops, frequently defending and justifying individual acts of violence while rejecting a greater "abstract" violence of society. *An American Dream's* Stephen Rojack demonstrates many of the same contentious traits of the existential "hipster" hero that Mailer creates, which are problematic in that they invoke a masculinity ethic that, in theory, contradicts the kind of freedom that Mailer initially imagines in the "better world." However, because Mailer demonstrates that a large portion of Rojack's violent goal fails, he leaves the reader with a number of inconsistencies that pose significant issues regarding the effects of personal violence that may be both liberating and oppressive.

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