

# Mailer's Existentialism and the American Existential Tradition

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**Abstract:** *Mailer occupies a prominent position within the American literary tradition due to his opposition to the dominant cultural values of his era. Influential American existentialist writers include Mailer, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Updike. Through their writings they celebrate personal freedom, reject determinism, and focus on human existence. Mailer's existentialism emphasizes individualism, authenticity, and moral ambiguity. He aligns himself with a longstanding lineage of writers who have sought to awaken the moral awareness of their audience, striving to connect language with concrete realities through the use of symbolism and imagery, as noted by Emerson. Furthermore, he has metaphorically illustrated the individual's spiritual journey as fundamentally intertwined with the broader narrative of America, both as a reality and as an ideal. Norman Mailer's existentialism and the American existential tradition are intriguing subjects that explore the human condition, individual freedom, and the search for meaning.*

**Keywords:** *Existentialism, symbolism, violent, psychopath.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Almost every topic Mailer oversees raises unexpected ambiguities and new dimensions of meaning. Mailer's convincing argument that his themes and his style are intertwined and vital seems more significant than whether or not we are always persuaded by his creative probing.

Mailer developed his own distinct style of existentialism, which incorporated the possibility of a God, even though he took inspiration from well-known existential theorists like Kierkegaard and Sartre. According to this chapter, Mailer believed that the essence of existentialism was the capacity to bravely approach the unknown, which in turn required facing the Manichaeon notion that an imperfect God was in perpetual conflict with the Devil.

The existentialism of Mailer differs from that of his European philosophical forebears. The significant finding of his entire body of work is that existential philosophy was being effectively developed and taught in America and throughout the world by Mailer's philosophical peers. There were two major schools of thought at the time: one based on Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 *Being and Nothingness*, and the other on Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*. Mailer explicitly denies an allegiance to Sartrean existentialism, even though he criticizes both Heideggerian and Sartrean existentialism for failing to consider the possibilities for

the self after death. In fact, Mailer argues that Sartre is the one who brought existentialism to a halt. Despite his criticism of Heideggerian philosophy, Mailer asserts that his own American kind of existentialism is an expression of Heideggerian philosophy. Similar to Heidegger, Mailer illustrates in his work how the individual becomes enmeshed in society's collective 'they-self.'

With his beliefs that God exists and that God is dependent on human behavior, Mailer's conception of the existential underpinnings of America both builds upon and diverges from Heideggerian existentialism. This is where Mailer's existentialist philosophy diverges from Heidegger's and assumes a religious meaning. Mailer expands on Heidegger's idea that 'whether God is determined from within the constellation of Being' that is, that God's existence is dependent on the individual despite the fact that Heidegger's existentialism is invariably secular. Mailer's belief that 'God depends on the outcome of human action' 'enlarges the meaning' of Heideggerian existentialism, building on Heidegger's idea that God depends on the person (qtd. in Adams 38; qtd. in Glendy 111-112). In the end, Mailer's perspective is a development of Heideggerian existentialism.

Mailer has explored European existentialism in all his major works by retaining certain concepts, changing others, and removing others completely.

Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Camus are the primary influences. Mailer is regarded as one of the most significant American writers of the twentieth century because of his insightful analyses of American society, excellent prose, and significant experimentation with a variety of literary forms. Mailer has made an effort to integrate his ideas into the framework of contemporary life so that his writing influences our perception of what is important and current rather than only making observations about it.

The 1957 essay 'The White Negro' by Norman Mailer has been divisive among reviewers for many years and is still quite controversial today. One Although more contemporary critique has addressed the problematic racial assumptions that Mailer conveyed in his article, its ontological importance has not been thoroughly examined. Mailer attempts to create a kind of Existentialism that appeals to a variety of traditions and paradigms that are characteristically American, such as transcendentalism and individualism, in 'The White Negro,' by fusing a type of spiritual immanence with the Existentialist paradigm.

Mailer believed that he was fighting for his life and looking for his roots throughout his career. He thought that in order for humanity to advance, the status quo had to be rejected. An existential human being ought to be a change agent. According to Mailer, society does not want men to act like men and to maintain their uniqueness. An existentialist is therefore forced to resist. One must contend with a fierce psychological battle to preserve his uniqueness while looking for his roots and a sense of purpose in life. His characters often grapple with existential crises, seeking authenticity and meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. His emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom resonates with existentialist philosophy.

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. Additionally, it is far more focused on a Manichean view of the world: according to Mailer, existentialism is a conflict between good and evil rather than only between immanence and transcendence. In the words of Maggie McKinley in *"Existentialism, Violent Liberation, and Racialized Masculinities: Norman Mailer's 'The White Negro' and 'An American Dream'"* (2016)-

He believes that to be a "real" existentialist, one must "be religious" and have a sense of purpose that is grounded in an awareness of heaven and hell (a meaningful but mysterious end), a point that (as he himself admits) runs contrary to Sartre's own atheistic existentialism. Mailer himself stated in his pivotal work *Advertisements for Myself*.

According to J. Michael Lennon, Mailer felt that his particular form of religious existentialism provided the

potential for 'spiritual transcendence,' which was absent from conventional American and European existentialism.

Praise for Mailer's storytelling skills is not really in style. This would be invoking 'traditional' literary procedures that are ostensibly unrelated to Mailer's accomplishment. According to Laura Adams traditional approaches to Mailer are insufficient, as Poirier and others' work has already demonstrated. Adams expresses her point of view in her critical work *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer* (1976)-

"An existential criticism is needed for purposes of evaluation even more than of interpretation of Mailer's work, and such a critical approach would have to accept Mailer's givens as its own and judge him by his own standards rather than insist that he conform to accepted literary tastes and practices."

Clearly, Adams wishes to shield Mailer from criticisms that are based on "accepted literary tastes and practices." She believes that Mailer must unavoidably fall short if evaluated using such antiquated "approaches."

Mailer shares Jung's interest in the unconscious as a potential source of psychic integration or wholeness as well as a primal source of psychic truth. The ego (the entire personality) has both somatic and cerebral foundations, according to Mailer and Jung, and psychic phenomena have roots in the personal and/or transpersonal psyche in addition to the body and mind, as well as the conscious and unconscious minds. Referring to the tendency Robert J. Begiebing states in *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer* (1980)-

After *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer began to emphasize the unconscious elements of his work, just as he continually disparaged the reductive, mechanical appropriation of psychological theory in some of his contemporaries. (p.7)

Mailer has developed a fascination with antisocial and psychopathic behavior as a result of his quest for the intriguing, uncharted potential of human choice. Because he wanted to try to delve into the secrets of time, orgy, incest, murder, suicide, and orgasm. His mind was filled with these ideas, and he believed he had a good chance of being the first Hip philosopher. Mailer has come under fire for his overabundance of violent content and for wrongly standing up for social outcasts like Gary Gilmore and Abbot. Mailer's idea of the psychopath, which is distinct from the typical psychopath found in textbooks, lies at the core of his theory of violence. Psychopaths or sociopaths in the clinical sense act out their disagreements with social standards. His

emotional immaturity, which drives him to satisfy all of his immediate demands, is the root cause of his antisocial behavior. His inability to experience normal shame after engaging in antisocial behavior, however, is what truly sets him apart and makes him stand out as a ruthless predator looking to exploit others. The psychopath hardly ever suspends his self-centeredness. Mailer's writing frequently incorporates philosophical and psychological insights, adding depth and complexity to his writings.

Mailer believed that existentialism concerns precisely those areas of experience where no expert is competent. One of Mailer's most pressing tasks throughout his career has been to find a hero—someone to look up to in terms of cultural survival. Culture and heroism should ideally emerge at the same time. However, Mailer's portrayal of America engulfed in pestilence gives the impression that his civilization is more dead than alive. Because of this, Mailer's quest for a hero incorporates a postmortem analysis of his culture, carried out in an existential way that permits all possibilities but one: there can be no expert on heroism at a moment more conducive to villainy.

Ultimately, Mailer has exposed more about America than any of his peers because he had the artistic integrity and moral bravery to write about the prospect of totalitarianism in the home of the brave and the land of the free. His work's consistency and breadth place him in the top tier of American prose writers, alongside authors such as Faulkner, Melville, James, Hawthorne, Emerson, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Twain, Poe, and Thoreau.

Mailer's works demonstrate his astute comprehension of the existential and philosophical dilemma that the individual faced in the 20th century. Mailer's perspective on the difficulties of life and modern living is comparable to those of other American Existentialists. Particularly, existentialists emphasize the consequences of our innate subjectivity and, consequently, our incapacity to ever arrive at a truly objective perspective; they emphasize the challenge of making decisions, choices, and commitments in the absence of absolute "Truths" and objective guidelines; they emphasize our existence as self-creating, meaning-seeking beings who must find purpose and value for our lives despite the fact that the world in which we have been "thrown" is illogical, pointless, and ridiculous.

## CONCLUSION

Through his writing, he has attempted to demonstrate that, as Nietzsche suggests, we should deviate from "the herd" and develop our own moral code and life plan. As Kierkegaard counsels, we must distance ourselves from "the crowd," develop a sense of self, make a commitment to a life's purpose, and live each day as if it were our last. As Heidegger suggests, we should break free from the "they" and work toward a more genuine life for ourselves, others, and the community. This will lead to a truer American

experience. As Mailer argues and demonstrates, we need to commit to and for our lives to guide the vigor of our creative energies. In order to perceive ourselves and the world more clearly, genuinely, truthfully, and holistically, we must accept responsibility for our own life. In addition to leading us through the existential core of his day, Mailer combines philosophy and art to convey the breadth and complexity of the problems facing humanity now. In addition to offering existentialist criticism of his American experiences, his work more significantly addresses and provides solutions for the existential dilemma of "Being" American during his era. Norman Mailer's unique blend of existentialist themes, literary innovation, and engagement with American culture and politics has cemented his position as a singular figure among American existentialists. Mailer's writing has inspired a generation of writers, critics, and intellectuals to engage with American culture and politics.

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