

DRUGS, DEPRESSION, AND
SOCIAL CHANGE:
HOW MAGIC REALISM MORPHED
INTO SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE
WRITINGS OF NORMAN MAILER

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A CONSIDERABLE PSYCHIC THRUST OF THE BEATNIKS, hippies, and revolutionaries began with the written and perceived anxieties of mid-century writers. Letters, newspaper clippings, and unpublished journals in the Mailer Archive at Harry Ransom Center attest to a few obvious themes: Mailer shared his collective vision with other anxious and challenged writers, and Mailer inhaled psychedelic consciousness from the same fruit of ambiguity as did many writers. It is noteworthy that Norman Mailer approached one's narcotic functioning—or if we may, dysfunctioning—from the annals of magic realism and his peculiar attachment to the relationship between the organism and his private, mediated proclivity for sense-vision. With correspondences with Al Aronowitz, James Baldwin, Harvey Breit, Aldous Huxley, and Truman Capote, the counterstroke to beatnik literary and occult glories was studied and wed to pragmatic assessments. At the same time, lest we ignore meaningful collaborations and thus ignore an explosion of psychic, psychedelic, and psychiatric content in the poetry and fiction of the Era, it is safe to assume that contemporary scholarship repeatedly found Mailer treading the same psychic grounds as the Beats, yet with a more limited method of self-evaluation that was constructive and less egoistic than the treaded giants of freakdom. Simply put, it is time that we acknowledge that a parallel move-

ment to liberate psychic and narcotic consciousness from its criminal shackles was penned effectively by Mailer as magic realism sawed its teeth to assault the glorious romanticism and comedism of penultimate figures like Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. Taken in the context of a twenty-year period, it seems likely that Mailer's superior popularity allowed him to promote the idea that one's internal consciousness proposed the robust, albeit garish and haggard, understanding of an expanded democracy and its narration of the modern American ethic. All the while, Mailer posited intelligent and clever parables of knowledge where the Beats were ensconced in the splendid and ancient metaphor of vision and experience: the cross-stroke, at times shared, built a very different perception in the American imagination of drugs, intoxication, religious occultism, and fandom.

J. Michael Lennon's exhaustive work provides the tryst with possible cross-examinations of meaningful narcology. In *A Double Life*, Lennon's authorized biography of Mailer, he points out summarily that taking drugs was a key to Mailer's body of later works that examine the psyche, depressive realism, and the effacement of man's moral singularity. Yet as a scholar who is also preoccupied with the broad range of psychedelic and narco-theorizing writers, a nagging question is pretty simple: which of the perspectives that bore fruit in the 1950s and 1960s holds the answer to modern man's identity, his estimations of consciousness, and the redevelopment of a moral self? These writers range in theme from pure romanticism to comedism to communal reconfigurations of "white"—as these were all white men writing from the standpoints of cross-cultural internalizations of the strange, the irrational, the aesthetic. "Realism" in the thinking of Norman Mailer performed mid-century American man's self-eclipse, his moment of joyful and depressive abandonment at the same time. Norman Mailer responded to the challenge of beatnik, then formally rejected it: this would mean that we may project influences beyond the cusp of beatnik glories and indoctrinations designed to negate the whole of American moral-personal consciousness. Magic realism, for so long muted and maybe less dimensional than "Beat," would rise again in the portrait of man and his story, or rather what would be left of it as we approached the declining decades of pure and intact doctrines of rationalism that followed from the philosophies of the 1920s and 1930s. A last point of query will be to discuss Mailer's positive compulsion for writing, which he shared with other narco-theorists, and thus sought to angle himself against the grain of what had come before or

what was prolifically around him. While it is true that Bill Burroughs gets most of the credit for building a positive science of understanding drugs, the brain, sickness, and depersonalization, it is likely that Mailer had built into himself the maturity and necessity of challenging his mostly comedic outlook that denatured democracy and the ethical “man.”

Magic realism’s debut in the expanding narco-rhetoric gains an anchoring, too, from Lennon’s affective treatise: he adeptly snapshots Mailer’s dark realism in “Lipton’s Journal” dated December 31, 1954, as Mailer notes that “The atom bomb may naturally have kicked off hipsterism” (*A Double Life* 189) and more poignantly and thoughtfully, “we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years” (189). I wish to point out that the sustaining of an uncalculated damage to the Soul and to romanticism was a metaphor decidedly in favor of Mailer’s gritty, harsh, and introspective moment of self-creation from a modern social and physical ethic, and was something that made Mailer’s stream of consciousness more socio-politically navigable, beefing up considerably the shock of his very special content. I shall attempt to build an understanding of “Lipton’s Journal” as a special narco-rhetoric, one untraversed by even the mighty and prolific Jack Kerouac and one that in contrast was linguistically and personally much more certain, and peculiar in its untraveled idealism. Although Mailer makes it clear that he borrows heavily from the literary and theoretical content of his era, and even more clear that such inoculations with both printed words and psychic stresses are what makes the journal so meaningful, his prose is very clear and contrasts significantly with other drug-taking writers who enjoyed and elongated the moment of intoxication. We may also deduce a special relationship with literary theory and psychology in the making of his brand of realism. While Lennon identifies the fact that Mailer did not contemplate the psychedelic drugs such as mescaline, LSD, and psilocybin—drugs that Huxley, Ginsberg, Bowles and Kerouac jubilantly praised as the antidotes to modern man’s cross of private and public suffering—Mailer’s pothead moments cross-pollinate magic realism and man’s psychic intentions with the drawing of new consciousness, a possible antidote to his private sense that, were we to borrow too heavily from the hippies our estimation of modern morals, we would surely come up empty and lost as citizens and thinkers.

Clarity in writing meets the essential clash between Sigmund Freud’s the-

ory of the unconscious and the advancing staff of Marxism in the Cold War period: “What I’ve noticed in writing is how often my unconscious is ahead of me, creating characters who seem alien to me at the time, only for me to discover later that indeed they are part of myself” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). Thus, Mailer’s pot depression appears creative, not sardonic and diminutive. This passage states Mailer’s wish to share his reflection as the reflection of other men and women in his time: we are naturally introspective and creative characters, and as Freud points out the “story” of the unconscious follows modern man’s stated ambitions (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 269). Mailer is also quick to crucify the emblems of the Beats: “No saint can be a teacher [. . .] That is why mystical writers write so badly. What they seek to communicate is simply incommunicable, and the distortion into language properly punishes them into banality” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). Perhaps Mailer’s “quick knockdown” of Kerouac was to be expected—he was unimpressed by Kerouac and would say so repeatedly. Still, the emblem of truth is unswayed by depression and intoxication—could you make an audience understand self-realization and introspection from words and writing that were so mixed with comedy and private aphorisms that they could constitute something “Real”? Notwithstanding the converse—Mailer borrows Kerouac’s love of Oswald Spengler and thus the modern estimation of Soul—Mailer is comfortable in stating that the new romanticism begged more questions than answers, and that written prose was readable in the estimation of human experience, sensible and true. It may be true that Mailer would not type Kerouac as a “saint,” yet it is a direct paraphrase from “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” published in the same year—“be a crazy dumbsaint of the mind” (*Selected Letters 1940–1956*). Yet Beatnik movies such as *On the Road* state proudly the link between marijuana and jazz—what of it for Mailer? What we find again is cogent and striking, and a living testament to the organismic affectation for music that spoke to man’s private, psychic, and preliterate cognition: “Particularly in modern jazz, one notices how Brubeck and Desmond, off entirely on their own with nothing but their nervous system to sustain them, wander through jungles of invention with society continually ambushing them” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). He is clear to note the modern, practical intellection of jazz: it is far from historical, far from primitive, and clear in telling the dynamics of modern man’s “condition.” On a simpler note, Mailer posits Marxism in a way that is much more realistic than Kerouac’s paraphrase of

Fyodor Dostoyevsky: “advertising and television and radio and newspapers and movies, but especially advertising are society’s war upon each individual. It is the place where advertising reaches deep into each man’s soul and converts a piece of it to society” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). Because Mailer writes “Lipton’s Journal” in 1954, he precedes the purer vagrant pose of Kerouac and Ginsberg, supplanting gothic techniques with a more elemental treatment of theory. Without saying the obvious that Mailer saw himself as clearer and smarter, we must allow that at a very early stage of the game—and with only two published books by this time—that Mailer was comfortable with theory and analysis and could integrate pot-soaked rambling with “good writing.”

Mailer’s deep investigation of his own psychosis carries with it the legend of twentieth-century literary, cultural, and historical theory. “Lipton’s Journal” analyzes the mind, the writing hand, speech, and sexuality. It is true that at many points he lumps together the entire troupe of writers—nevertheless, lucid prose accomplishes the pretense to deep meditations on the human psyche when confronted with the unconscious. He writes:

This is the age of the war of the sensitivities. At a seemingly superficial level it is the battle of Dissent vs. Partisan Review vs. Commentary; or Carson McCullers and Paul Bowles and Truman Capote vs. Jones and Early Mailer. [. . .] On a historical scale it was the conflict of sensitivities (the deep conviction of each that he alone saw the nature of reality) which set off the individual and collective murders in the context of Lenin vs. Trotsky; Trotsky vs. Stalin; Stalin vs. Hitler. (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2)

This tryst was at best unlikely—Mailer states “war” as that between gay and straight, capitalist and Marxist, which may seem somewhat out of context. Nonetheless, he puts down his reflections before Bowles writes about *kif* in 1961, and before McCullers writes about Southern decadence in 1962. In this instance, we may rely upon him as a theorist before more romantic excavations of the private mirror swept social circles with the awesome engine of grand cultural over-suggestions of Spirit and Mind. As a juror of the mind and experience, Mailer is surefooted in building his ground by snapping back at “what came before” or “what was still here: “[. . .] the psychoana-

lyst is a psychopath masquerading as a quiet restrained ‘sensitive’ mildly neurotic middle class adjusted human being” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). He then crosses this with his self-evaluation, which in fact appears many times in “Lipton’s Journal”: “The tiniest most insignificant gesture or remark opens a world to me” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). War and predation, not being of the “stasis” that Mailer clearly prefers in this long self-excavation, prolongs and furthers his anxiety—though Mailer gives no credit to the romantic and natural aesthetics of marijuana intoxication, it seems as though his reflection was so positive and generative that he has a great deal of time to think through many of his obsessions and communications in a way that precedes Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Huxley’s novella, *Brave New World*. Magic realism is thus paired with modern man’s practical problems—he gives no ground to T.S. Eliot’s monolithic estimations of culture and consciousness, nor Martin Heidegger’s systemization of the soul under one Consciousness. On a simpler note, also clear was the fact that Mailer estimated the depth of the challenge in writing and speech: his evaluation powers the later novels that he writes such as *An American Dream* and *The Executioner’s Song*, both works that estimate catastrophe and death over beauty and life. As a perceived “realist,” Mailer divines his own supersession of the fold deliciously and sweetly, a moment of narcotic fulfillment without religion. Clearly, and at a very early stage long before counterculture and drug law reforms hit the law books, Mailer has divined the special unconscious moment as being manifold and yet emanating from his private consciousness.

Mailer deserves considerable credit for fathering drug law reform—a problem penned by William S. Burroughs in his novel *Junky*, where he attests to severe narcotics laws in places across the United States defining drug addiction itself as a crime (*Junky*). Mailer testified before Congress to end the prohibition of narcotics fiction such as Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*—here was a beginning for the critical re-examination of principles outlined in the Boggs Act of 1951 that narrowly defined and punished any form of drug addiction. What the HRC clippings from newspapers and advertisements form is a positive obsession of the meaning of “drugs” and a controversial expansion of what was culpable in usurping the American imagination—Mailer is interested in both re-examining what “addiction” means and what states of mind were truly culpable in the modern world. We must note that fluctuations in Mailer’s general perspective accounted for the anxiety of the au-

thor and maybe prophet, if we were to nix Kerouac's role: Lennon points to fierce tensions, for example, in the penning of anything close to ecstasy. He writes, "Mailer thought the newspaper (*Voice*) 'should be very radical, full of sex and drugs,' [Rhoda] Wolf recalled. Mailer didn't think the paper would make it, Wolf said, 'so it should go out in a blaze of glory like a big fire-cracker.'" (*A Double Life* 204)

Many critics, beginning with Barry Miles, have pointed to intense fighting between writers and publishers who were arguing over content: writing about drugs was a negotiation against a perceived phantom of censorship that attempted to keep content clean and authoritarian, and it must be said that few publishers were actually friendly with documenting the experiences of narcotic use and, if we may, addiction. Lennon's notation of the fact forces us to acknowledge that Mailer could not write what he wanted, could not truly escape the confines of the abiding perspective that drugs were harmful and inevitably capsized to the Beats and other writers who were writing in terms of friendly comedy and anti-political moments of abandonment that probably screened them forever as escapists who were inferior to the true content of modern moralism. It is without question that this anger negotiated his later works when publishers had acknowledged the fact, and that the locus of control could not be upheld. It then becomes impingent upon us as scholars and historians to note the counter-positive: Mailer would examine the legitimate ground for social policy, meditate the dynamics of social change from acceptable norms that could redirect thinking more popularly without heavy-handed authorial dictations that demanded immediate social change.

More obvious motions appear in the July 9, 1962, news edition of *The League of Civil Education*: the tension between moral responsibility and its pragmatic application becomes evident. The columnist writes at first: "The Court has ruled that laws making it an offense to be a drug addict are unconstitutional [. . .] It has been the guiding rule for some time that complete 'state of being' laws were unconstitutional" (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). Yet the functioning of organized crime as a vehicle of today's capitalism was much more obvious and deadpans "the system" in such a way to set up mafia paradigms of villainy such as that found in *An American Dream* to state broadly the true outlook of a challenging perspective that considers and contemplates man's presumed ethical certainty in the world's most prosperous democracy: "Probably the traffic in narcotics is the most repreh-

sible of all the known crimes. Those persons responsible for the distribution deny to all persons the dignity of the being” (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2). The identification of organized crime as the culprit behind themes of destruction and demoralization thus reverses Burroughs’s narration in *Junky*: it was the seller, and not the user, who was evil, and that ethical standards would in the future treat the addict as one who has lost his way, who had placed his ethical trust into the wicked labyrinth of dehumanizing circumstances. The move also very nicely abolishes Bureau of Narcotics Chair Harry Anslinger’s reduction to the status of evil and Satanism: it strips drug-taking of its more wicked cult identity, its anti-Christian moment of pure and unrestrained hedonism, and its subversive and racial metaphors that promised revolutionary re-drawings of moral consciousness. It would take more time for confirmed romantics—and anti-romantics, such as Bill Burroughs—to address the more troubling characteristics of man’s depersonalization through drugs. They were more likely to project the decentralization and deinstitutionalization of the State as maker of social policy, and advance innocently the project of man’s utopia in a political world. It is the clear thinking at the apex of Pax Americana that allowed Mailer to thus address his estimation of man’s Soul and his tactile relationship with morality. “Common sense”, or rather the piecemeal application of humanity as a legal method, would be abetted, whereas romantic notions of ecstasy and simplicity would be modified or bypassed in a realistic world that accepts that human beings were prone to the makings of excess, and not monstrous, beatific stature in the man-God and man-Society relationships. Future Mailer novels would address the legal and moral ramifications of nagging, hurtful, and even sinister gothic of a pure and relentless conflict with the Real, the Moral, the Truth. They would also denature family and community as the crux of what made America the most virtuous *topos* of moral and personal Truth.

Moral-personal excavations of Self may force us to ask very general questions about the true agency of drugs: it is without much hesitation that we attribute other narco-theorists to truer excavations of “the story” and its anticipated objectivity in a changing world. I strongly believe, after 25 years of using drugs and facing the seemingly omnipotent stress for rehabilitation, that any kind of study of drug use and its mythology must turn to one potent vehicle for understanding truth—Aldous Huxley. A comparison of the two men finds Mailer, for example, writing Huxley in 1954 to seek eye treat-

ment that involves mental therapy (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2): we may ask, then, what could be made of the heroic and utopic challenge to a magic realism that borrowed dislocations and depersonalizations from the misunderstanding of this central challenge that would sweep the entire generation of baby boomers. Mailer's positive level of skill and rhetorical aptitude would be tested by the burgeoning conversation mandating social and moral change as West learned East and the occult shouldered itself against logic and ethics. I found that there was a great deal of useful material: Huxley ingratiates himself into certitude with his unpublished dialogues that simply did not have to consider the collective problem of publishing and popularity—he was in his sixties by this time and in declining health. The Aldous Huxley Collection includes several interviews and meetings in which the technique of hallucinogenic indoctrination would transfigure notions of Spirit and the Self. A March 31, 1961, luncheon with Huxley in Toronto would state relationships between drugs and Eastern mythology that are very translatable onto the Western mind, beginning with easily adaptable depersonalizations that attract the hand of magic realism:

LCW: There are half a million Hindus in India who all say that they have had previous lives.

AH: Yes, I mean it is taken for granted in India. (*Aldous Huxley Collection*)

Clarity was a point of astute introduction for Huxley: there is no rambling and comedic diminution of the Spirit, as with Allen Ginsberg in *Indian Journals*. Yet Ginsberg studied the mind-body cataclysms firsthand and personally identified with its presences and bodies while in India, and at the same time: did Huxley at any point configure man's mental focus, so as to delimit the more nagging problems of agency? Because the impact of drug use was still very questionable, would we narrate them from the mind-body standpoint in a manner friendly to European and American ethics? The luncheon recalls the following eclipse of the narcotic-imbibing mind:

RB : Is it possible to paint the vision one had?

AH: Well, people tried but obviously it is a hopeless task, it is obvious to me anyhow that Van Gogh painted these things and undoubtedly saw the world as the L.S.D. and Mescaline subject

sees it. Brilliant in colour, incredibly intense, full of movement. I think he got nearer to painting it than anyone else has ever done[. . .].

AH: [. . .] the images, and as far as I am concerned from most people that I have talked to, the sort of non-formed images, non-human, non-naturalistic images, are mainly geometrical. What I would say is that the sort of non-human images are much more close to cubism than they are to the present type of non-objective impressionism. I think that there is a lot of cubism in the kind of living geometries which appear in certain phases of the L.S.D. experience. (*Aldous Huxley Collection*).

Throughout the looking eye of this meeting, Huxley is adept and very easy to understand: he projects an understanding of Self and perception, or rather the inoculation of brain- and body-contexts, with a concentrated and adaptable focus. We may ask of magic realism, then, what did it mean to be objective, to paint man's depression without comedy or profanity? Mailer, for his part, dealt with the objective form from an admixture of exaggeration and stasis that was true to his self-vanity: he posited himself as an engaging figure confronted with a Heideggerian consciousness and selfhood that borrowed yet continuously advanced the portrait of an emerging, questioning, and meditating being. Mind-body discussions include several writers, including Harvey Breit, James Baldwin, and Al Aronowitz, all of whom shadow the undying technique of confession with their search for Mailer's guidance. The collective portrait then reflects the admixture of Mailer's social spheres while projecting the ultimate Beat parable: writers would engage and conquer the establishment, denaturing them and reforming them through the questionable and crazed revelry of drugs. His narration of himself arranges the details of self-evaluation versus the emerging problem of non-rational exercise of the psyche, in a language and *ethos* that never actually shuffles the cards of his memories and dreams, and without the lingering stress on romantic engagements of hallucinogens that, by 1961, included several writers who thought it promised complete spiritual redemption in an exhausted and depressed West. The reverse portrait in Box 2 includes a thoughtful sketch of Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby, who shot JFK's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, to death in 1963. It borrows heavily from the tech-

nique of beatniks such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac—indeed, only one year after Ginsberg had written several poems about famous politicians such as JFK. The portrait of Ruby, while darkly ironic and a metamorphosis of man-Society and institution-culture relationships that cover American society's persistent racism and self-shielding jingoism, introduces itself from a familiar point of Blackness: "Baby, gnaw on your own funky Uncle Tom pine cone" (*Norman Mailer Collection*). Without reversing Bob Dylan's paeon—"a hard rain's gonna fall" (*Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*), a glance at Jack Ruby reshuffles the details of American paranoia so as to highlight the escape from the body. The anti-rational psyche of a man smoking marijuana so as to get a closer look at the makings of his Soul is thus grafted onto the national-institutional portrait without the same extreme comic reductions that Ginsberg exhumed from generations of lively political comedy. Mailer writes:

So, we are free. The question, kids, is this: Ruby tell the truth because he is now clear-Handed and free in hospital prison to breathe the anti-cancer air of this night-ass Texas wind (Baron Lord of Texas), or do he he say-listen now-say what they they want him to say because if Rube don't record the way he got to record they take away his now-given deathbed window—and let him die deep in his windowless nightless cancer age-old shit. What the answer who can know? We one question deeper into the Great American End of Tale. (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2)

Mailer praises Ruby for silencing disclosure at other points in this journal entry. He has forced us to recognize the burning questions about democracy because we no longer have the easy "fix" of information and journalism, and certainly the rule of law. Marijuana intoxication loosens the moment of pure configuration, then applies it to be an anti-moral rhetoric that does not propose government and instead welcomes the antithesis of pastoralism as the state of true bliss. At another point, he slices through Kerouac's parable of piety and happiness as the means for securing countercultural revolution—in a manner that nicely anticipates the supreme cynicism of 1970s writer and mogul Hunter Thompson:

But what we also know is Warren Commission slut and the hoods in the heart of the fuzz, fine, foo, yeah FBI, take a bow, so here is how it is—I, you, humble reformed hood, so do not know Jack Ruby told it time in death bed news or quote WJT Jan-Three—but Berman Specia Ruby reportedly has said that he never slept well during the years under constant quadron [. . .] Now, despite constant porn, Ruby supposedly has been able to sleep better and has clarified his thoughts. He reportedly has attributed this to the hospital room’s windows, which enable him to tell night from day. (*Norman Mailer Collection*, Box 2)

Allen Ginsberg’s paeans to JFK and Walt Whitman sag with questions, thus demonstrating the total disenfranchisement of young people who may take drugs to enjoy easygoing moments and to dream of a universe constructed out of ideality. Schizophrenia and cancer, too, strangle the moment of ethical reflection. Yet managing the hospital as a reflective transcendence was just icing on the cake for Mailer—he thus anticipates the drug addiction and its sweet pleasure in isolation, as with the movie *Drugstore Cowboy*—“I was headed to the fattest pharmacy in the state” (*Drugstore Cowboy*). Anti-romantic reflections find Mailer’s true moment of transcendence—the eclipse of social responsibility, and democracy’s separation of his man from fellow men. Unpopular in the most superficial of senses, democracy and feeling collide in such a way that the human spirit becomes truly individuated and married to its own cerebral self-perception and windowing of the written “idea” of a functioning democracy. From a thematic standpoint, the comparisons become easier and plainer, and to the point of garish certainty—Mailer’s anti-man would stand shortly thereafter, in *An American Dream*. Future Mailer novels would make use of the deriding of the natural aesthetic and its supplanting institutions and their dark moments of comedy with a pure and enjoyed defiance, a mentation meant to separate man from his childhood dreams, and maybe to suppress them forever in such a way as to make the American “man” stand in his moment of introspection.

On a concluding note, we may borrow the assessment of narco-theory from its annals. The Beats dwindled in output, while Huxley, Breit and Baldwin died in the early years of the 1960s. Future “narco-novels” such as those by Hunter Thompson and Thomas Pynchon may be written from a shadowed viewpoint that was cynical rather than prone to gothic inversions, yet

the simple facts were clear: Mailer continued to write and promote an expansive narco-realism, and he integrated with this the realistic portrait of society and community under the stance of drug-taking. “Lipton’s Journal”, as Lennon points out, was inherently fruitful, allowing Mailer to engage psychosis, depression, schizophrenia, and sickness all as part of one emerging mind-body debate that had transfigured the demented into the peculiarly sane and cogent. Magic realism thus enjoyed a much longer breath—perhaps one that straddled the focus of the 1960s and advanced themes of isolation and xenophobia for future generations to ponder.

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