Background Example – Stonewall Rights impact on American Culture

The setting of the revolutionary riots took place at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located in

the Greenwich Village of New York City. In the city of New York as well as other places in the

United States, homophobia and heterosexism existed in the streets. With “every state except

Illinois [carrying] sodomy laws that prohibited nonvaginal intercourse”, “the medical community

[condemning] homosexuals as mentally ill”, and “police officers [practicing] the art of

entrapment to tease the offending gays out of the crowd”, the public was an oppressive

environment that became deleterious to the everyday lives of the gay community (Bausum 3-15).

Due to the overwhelming amount of injustice and discrimination bestowed by the public, the

Stonewall Inn ultimately became a sanctuary for the local homosexuals. The bar “served as a

space for gays to meet, dance together, and express their physical attractions. It provided a

showplace for cross-dressers to camp it up in their finery. It was a spot to hang out with other

people who understood what it felt like to be gay on the cutting edge of changing times”

(Bausum 3). However, despite the positive environment that it promoted, the Stonewall Inn

mustered some negative effects; it was “run by the Mafia” and was “the headquarters for other

illegal activity”, meaning that encounters with the law enforcement were predestined (Teal).

The conflict involving law enforcement and the Stonewall Inn only brought more

evolving anger in the gay community. Being a Mafia-owned business, “there was that collision

between the cops and the mobs, and the [gays] were… caught in the middle all the time.”

Though the encounters of the Mafia and the law enforcement typically only involved “the police

[getting] paid off by the club, the standard practice for lesbian and homosexual clubs in New

York City”, the police used this connection to the homosexuals to their advantage (Carter 78).

With that connection, the police “raided the bars” and arrested homosexuals “to enforce laws that

prohibited various aspects of homosexual behavior” (Bausum 5). The act of the Mafia payoffs

and the homosexual raids eventually became a routine for the Stonewall Inn: “The bar staff

stopped serving the watered-down, overpriced drinks, while their Mafia bosses swiftly removed

the cigar boxes which functioned as tills. The officers demanded identification papers from the

customers and then escorted them outside, throwing some into a waiting paddy-wagon and

pushing others off the sidewalk” (Wright). However, the unjust incarceration of the homosexuals

on a frequent basis began to damage and wear out the gay community; it was only a matter of

time until they were provoked to fight back.

On June 28, 1969, the inevitable happened; the gays fought back. In the early hours of

that morning, the gays at the Stonewall Inn faced their final straw when the paddywagons of the

police arrived at the bar and “three of the more blatant queens―in full drag—were loaded inside,

along with the bartender”, the “doorman”, and “a dyke” (Wolf). At that moment, the gays

responded “by throwing beer cans and bottles” at the police, ultimately starting the riot “which

lasted two nights” with “a crowd of 2,000 [battling] 400 policemen” (Dudley 248). During these

riots, some of the gay community fought peacefully. For example, “on the boarded-up front

window [of the Stonewall Inn], anonymous protesters had sprawled signed and slogans” that

advocated for gay power. Additionally, “newly emboldened same-gender couples were seen

holding hands as they anxiously conferred about the meaning of these uncommon new

assertions” (Duberman 202). However, most of the community fought back with violence. John

O’Brien, who took part in the riots, stated, “Our goal was to hurt the police… I wanted to kill

those cops for the anger I had in me. And the cops got that. And they were lucky that door was

closed, they were very lucky” (Bausum 49). The Tactical Patrol Force eventually brought an end

to the uprise after two days of the consecutive rioting. Though the riots ended, its legacy

continued to flare; this was the first time in history in which homosexuals defied and fought

against authority for the sake of gay rights. The incident on that fateful morning became known

as Stonewall Riots, the symbolic movement that became the turning point for gay liberation.