20th Century American Literature

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**Lecture Notes: 1960s Counter-culture** (counter= “against” or “opposite”)

1. **Definition:** What is it? During the 1960’s a complex set of events and ideas caused rapid social changes in almost every part of American life. Some of the issues it incorporated included sexual relationships, religious freedom, drug culture, music as protest, racial equality, women’s rights, environmentalism, anti-war movements, free-speech movements, LGBT rights, nuclear disarmament, and geo-politics.
2. **Historical Background:** Who did it and why? After World War II many US military personnel returned home, leading to several rapid changes in America.
   1. The Baby Boom: Not surprisingly, many babies were born in a short time after the war. These children were very different from their parents. They never experienced the stress of wartime sacrifice or economic depression and they were more inclined to reject social pressure to conform to the expectations of others. They were also, for the most part, much more educated than their parents.
   2. The Post War Economy: Prior to World War II the United States had been suffering the worst economic depression in the country’s history. There are indications that the economic stimulus enacted by FDR prior to the war was already taking effect by the beginning of the war, but the industrial capacity of the country greatly expanded during the war and further stimulus (ex. The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, sometimes called the “G.I. Bill”, which provided subsidized home loans and university tuition for veterans) led to a pro-longed period of economic prosperity from 1948-1972. There were several collateral effects of this prosperity:
      1. Materialism: The Rise of the American Consumer. In the 1950’s the American marketing machine reinforced the idea that a “good life” could be purchased with money (if you had the best car, coldest refrigerator, nicest house, best TV, etc.)
      2. New Media: Radio, Film, and TV. Family dramas and TV commercials of the 1950’s reinforced the model home life: a submissive wife, successful husband, obedient children, beautiful house full of expensive things, cheerful neighbors…the utopia of the American dream.
      3. Middle-class Drug Culture. Many people succumbed to the pressure of trying to create this “perfect” life, and the availability of prescription drugs like barbiturates (downers) and amphetamines (uppers) made it socially acceptable for successful, middle-class people to use mood- and mind-altering drugs.
      4. The Rise of Secondary Education for Middle Class Students. One of the most important aspects of the “new” American prosperity was the idea that every student should attend university. As the Baby Boom grew up and entered university, there was a shortage of “tenured” professors. New professors with radical ideas began teaching university courses and the conservative culture lost control of the university curriculum.
   3. Women in the Workplace and “Rosie the Riveter”: During World War to a massive labor shortage led to a nationwide call for women to enter the workplace. Prior to this women had been limited in their career options outside of the home. When the war was over and women were then encouraged to give up their careers and stay in the home there was resistance. The idea that women should be “mothers” and men should be “workers” had been destroyed by that time. This led many women to seek to seek reproductive choices, sexual relationships outside of traditional marriage, and birth control.
   4. Desegregation of the US Military Forces: During World War II (and all previous wars) black soldiers and white soldiers were maintained in separate units. The poor treatment of black soldiers led to many protests during the war, and after the war President Truman issued an order that the military was to be desegregated. The Korean War was the first war where black and white soldiers fought together. This caused many people (especially middle class men who came to befriend African-Americans in the military) to become sympathetic to and participate in the struggle for racial equality.
   5. The Cold War: The collapse of the German, Japanese, French, and English economies after the war led to a “power vacuum” in the world. The United States and U.S.S.R. became the world’s first Superpowers, and each fought behind the scenes to gain influence throughout the world (most importantly in Eastern Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia) and to promote their ways of life there. Attitudes toward government military policies were probably the biggest political difference between the Boomer’s and their parents. For many people, the controversy over the war in Vietnam was the central event of the movement.
   6. The Rise of Environmental Awareness. During this period people began to question the right of large corporations and manufacturing operations to damage the environment and harm the lives of normal people. This was the first time that large groups of Americans sought to limit the power of large businesses.
3. **Central Conflicts:** What were the issues? (or some of them)
   1. The Feminist Movement. Although women had begun fighting for more rights in the mid-19th Century (as a result of their participation in America’s first great protest, the fight against slavery), they began to assert themselves in new ways during the 1960’s. This so-called “Second Wave” of feminism focused on changing the sexist nature of power structures in addition to specific economic and political issues.
   2. The Civil Rights Movement. Although primarily associated in the US with the struggles of African-Americans, the civil rights movement came to include the goal of achieving equality for all oppressed Americans, including LGBT people, Native Americans, Latin-Americans, and others. It was an international movement, with major conflicts in Northern Ireland, Germany, France, Mexico, South Africa, India, and many other countries.
   3. The Environmental Movement. With the publication of *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, many Americans were surprised to find that the large corporations of the US were not only destroying the environment, they were doing to without any responsibility to clean up or repay the American people for the damage they had caused. Most people were also shocked to learn that the toxic chemicals being released into the environment were endangering the health of all Americans and endangering the food supply.
   4. The Anti-war Movement. The greatest source of violent protest in US history, the war in Vietnam inflamed the passions of American youth. This was the central conflict of the time.
   5. The Sexual Revolution. As young people began to question all of the assumptions of their parent’s generation, they began to experiment with different forms of loving as well. Scientific studies into human sexuality caused people to question a lot of old ideas about love and sex. One of the popular sayings of the day was “Make Love not War.” Many young people saw sexual freedom as a means of social protest.
   6. Drug Culture. Drug use in the 1960’s centered on the powerful hallucinogen LSD. Taking the drug was seen by many as a spiritual experience, and it certainly mirrored in many ways the effects of other psychotropic hallucinogens (such as the peyote cactus flower) that had been used by indigenous peoples for centuries. The drug affected the gateway between perceived reality and the subconscious. Many people who took it claimed to have “out-of-body” experiences, religious awaking, and paranormal experiences.
   7. Rock and Roll. One of the other popular slogans of the day was “Drugs, Sex, and Rock and Roll.” Music was the glue that held all of these people together. Young people didn’t have control of the newspapers, or the television, or the movies, but they did have control over popular music…and the music that young people wanted to hear was music about love and protest. Many popular musicians of the day (such as Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and The Doors) became actively involved in the movements of the day.
4. **Voices:** Who were some important people of the time?
   1. Bob Dylan has been called “the voice of a generation.” Many of his songs became anthems for the movements of the day. Although he never wanted to be, he became a leader or figurehead for the protests he inspired. He is without a doubt the most influential songwriter in American history, with his music being performed by hundreds of other musicians. He has been on tour for over thirty years.
   2. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister who led the American Civil Rights movement through a philosophy of non-violent protest inspired by the work of Gandhi in India. He received the Nobel Peace prize for his leadership in 1964. He was assassinated in 1968.
   3. Rachel Carson wrote one of the most important works on the environment, *Silent Spring*, which was published in 1962. The book focused on the effect of pesticides on the environment, especially songbirds. She died of cancer in 1964.
   4. William Masters and Virginia Johnson were a research team who conducted groundbreaking research into the response of humans to sexual stimulation. Their first important work, *Human Sexual Response*, was published in 1966. The book dispelled many myths about human sex and explained in detail the process of arousal, stimulation, and orgasm. During the study they observed the sexual response of nearly seven hundred individuals in individual and coupled experiments.