Handout 1 - Journalists Describe the Haight-Ashbury Scene

Activity Instructions:

1. Give each person in the group a single page from the handout to read.

2. After reading the handout, each person should address the following questions on a scratch piece of paper:

   • Whose account of the Haight-Ashbury scene did you read? What is the author’s background?

   • How does the author describe the hippies of Haight-Ashbury? According to the writer, who were the hippies and what did they value?

   • Do you find it the author’s account complimentary towards the hippies, or critical? What evidence can you provide that leads you to this conclusion?

   • According to the writer, what was the cause of the Hippie phenomenon?

3. Reform as a group, and debate the following question, using the account you read to support your case:

   Were the young people who moved to Haight Ashbury in 1966-1968 interested in making life in America better, or was their goal to remove themselves from American society? Do you think that their efforts were successful?
Ralph J. Gleason, “The Flower Children” (Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook, 1968)

Ralph J. Gleason was an eminent music and cultural critic, perhaps most famously known for co-founding Rolling Stone magazine. Gleason began his career in journalism at Columbia University, as the editor of the students newspaper The Spectator. He then went on to co-found the first Jazz magazine in America, Jazz Spectator.

After serving in World War II, Gleason moved to San Francisco and became a syndicated music and culture writer with The San Francisco Chronicle, where he documented the Jazz and later Hippie scene in the city. Gleason served as the editor of the radical political magazine Ramparts, before leaving in protest after fellow editor Warren Hinckle’s critical account of the Hippy movement was published. He went on to co-found Rolling Stone with Jann Wenner. In addition to his writing, Gleason produced a television series focused on Jazz, and was a Jazz disc jockey at two San Francisco Radio Stations.

Excerpt

Hippies are first of all young people. Generally they are young people in their teens or early 20s living out a rejection of material wealth and Puritan ethic [...]

In contrast to the Elders of the Tribe, the hippies regard fun and enjoyment as laudable, even as a goal. Dancing has returned with the hippie and dance halls, which all but vanished from the American scene after World War II, have reappeared. In San Francisco, where the hippie movement began and which is still the capital of hippiedom, hundreds and sometimes thousands of hippies dance each week at the various ballrooms or at outdoor functions.

Almost all hippies are white and this is significant. They are the children of the “haves” who are rejecting the values and rewards of the society—the same values and rewards that Negroes are struggling to obtain. In the course of their rejection, they have created a new way of looking at things and a new context in which to live.

One of the remarkable aspects of the hippie movement—in contrast to the beatniks—in its tremendous surge of energy. Early in 1967, a group of hippies...leased an abandoned movie house on Haight Street, raised about $60,000, and spent it to transform the rococo interior into a marvelously utilitarian "environmental theater"... Other groups of hippies have organized day camps, schools, and communes in the adjacent countryside, living in groups of 10 or 20 on farms and, in one case, operating a huge ranch in the Valley of the Moon as a six-day school with a volunteer factory. When the city of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors refused to come to the aid of the Flower Children who had flocked into the city during the summer school recess, the hippies organized themselves into work details, swept the streets, expanded the Digger free food and free store operations, started a hip switchboard telephone exchange to locate runaways and lost friends and to put people in contact with needed services.
Along with writers Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe is considered one of the founders of “New Journalism.” Considered unconventional in the 1960s and 1970s, “New Journalism” prioritized a more personal writing style inspired by fiction, and demanded a journalist’s complete immersion into the story they were writing about.

Wolfe began his career as a journalist at a small newspaper in Massachusetts, before moving on to larger publications such as The Washington Post, The New York Herald Tribune, and Esquire. He soon gained a reputation for critiquing the hypocracies and extravagencies of Post-War America, and providing insight into the social significance of American popular culture.

In 1968, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test was published, the first of many works of fiction and nonfiction Wolfe would write. The book chronicles Wolfe’s experiences with the Merry Pranksters, a group founded by author Ken Kesey that toured the country in a bus. The Merry Prankster’s philosophy and lifestyle would later became a primary source of inspiration for the hippie movement. The title of the book refers to one of the Merry Prankster’s most well-known activities: holding “Acid Test” parties in San Francisco, which featured psychedelic lights, music, and Kool-aid dosed with the hallucinatory drug LSD.

Excerpt:
All eyes were on Kesey and his group, known as the Merry Pranksters. Thousands of kids were moving into San Francisco for a life based on LSD and the psychedelic thing. Thing was the major abstract word in Haight-Ashbury. It could mean anything, isms, life styles, habits, leanings, causes, sexual organs; thing and freak; freak referred to styles and obsessions, as in “Stewart Brand is an Indian freak” or “the zodiac—that’s her freak,” or just to heads in costume. It wasn’t a negative word. Anyway, just a couple of weeks before, the heads had held their first big “be-in” in Golden Gate Park, at the foot of the hill leading up into Haight Ashbury, in mock observation of the day LSD became illegal in California. This was a gathering of all the tribes, all the communal groups. All the freaks came and did their thing. A head named Michael Bowen started it, and thousands of them piled in, in high costume, ringing bells, chanting, dancing ecstatically, blowing their minds one and another and making their favorite satiric gestures to the cops, handing them flowers, burying the bastids in tender fruity pedals of love. Oh Christ, Tom, the thing was fantastic, a freaking mind-blower; thousands of high-loving heads out there messing up the minds of the cops and everyone else in a fiesta of love and euphoria....
Joan Didion, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” (1967)

One of the most celebrated American writers in the 21st century, Joan Didion began her career as a journalist for *Vogue* after winning an essay contest organized by the magazine. In addition to a series of essays written for various magazines, Didion has also authored novels, screenplays, and memoirs. With Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, she is considered one of the principle writers of the “New Journalism” style.

In 1967, Didion’s essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. The essay, which would later be included in her first book of essays under the same title, became one of Didion’s most well-read pieces. The honesty and insight expressed in the article, coupled with a shocking ending in which Didion witnesses a 5-year old girl high on LSD, makes “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” a seminal account of the Haight-Ashbury scene, and one of the finest examples of “New Journalism” to be published.

**Excerpt**

We were seeing something important [in Haight-Ashbury]. We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society’s atomization could be reversed. At some point between 1945 and 1967, we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing. Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves, maybe we were having a failure of nerve about the game. Or maybe there were just too few people around to do the telling. These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced the society’s values. They are children who have moved around a lot, San Jose, Chula Vista, here. They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, Vietnam, diet pills, the Bomb.

They feed back exactly what is given them. Because they do not believe in words—words are for “typeheads,” Chester Anderson tells them, and a thought which needs words is just another ego trip —their only proficient vocabulary is in the society’s platitudes. As it happens, I am still committed to the idea that the ability to think for oneself depends upon one’s mastery of the language, and I am not optimistic about children who will settle for saying, to indicate that their mother and father do not live together, that they come from “a broken home.” They are 14, 15, 16 years old, younger all the time, an army of children waiting to be given the words.
Hunter S. Thompson is one of the most well-known journalists chronicling American counterculture in the 1960s-1990s. Part of the tradition of “New Journalism,” Thompson took the concept a step further, creating “Gonzo Journalism,” which does away with an objective perspective almost entirely, and focuses on the journalist’s unique perspective.

Thompson began his career as a journalist after joining the United States Air Force, where he covered sports of the Air Force Base newspaper. He then worked for a variety of small newspapers, and gained notoriety after publishing the article “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved” in a small publication edited by Warren Hinckle. The article was hailed as being “a breakthrough of journalism.” From there he began writing for larger publications such as a *Rolling Stone*, and authored dozens of books, perhaps most famously *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

**Excerpt**

There is no shortage of documentation for the thesis that the current Haight-Ashbury scene is only the orgiastic tip of a great psychedelic iceberg that is already drifting in the sea lanes of the Great Society. Submerged and uncountable is the mass of intelligent, capable heads who want nothing so much as peaceful anonymity. In a nervous society where a man’s image is frequently more important than his reality, the only people who can afford to advertise their drug menus are those with nothing to lose.

And these—for the moment, at least—are the young lotus-eaters, the barefoot mystics and hairy freaks of the Haight-Ashbury—all those primitive Christians, peaceful nay-sayers and half-deluded “flower children” who refuse to participate in a society which looks to them like a mean, calculated and sol-destroying hoax.

As recently as two years ago, many of the best and brightest of them were passionately involved in the realities of political, social, and economic life in America. But the scene has changed since then and political activism is going out of style. The thrust is no longer for “change” or “progress” or “revolution,” but merely to escape, to live on the far perimeter of a world that might have been—perhaps should have been—and strike a bargain for survival on purely personal terms.

The flourishing hippie scene is a matter of desperate concern to the political activists. They see a whole generation of rebels drifting off to a drugged limbo, ready to accept almost anything as long as it comes with enough “soma.”

Warren Hinckle is best known for publishing *Ramparts*, a radical political magazine for liberal Roman Catholics. Under Hinckle, the magazine became known for its depth of reporting and unapologetic cover stories. In 1967, it published photographs of Vietnamese children injured by American bombs, a story which would go on to convince Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to make a stand against the war. Like the magazine itself, Hinckle was flamboyant, known for wearing a large eye patch (he lost an eye in an accident), and owning a pet monkey, that would perch on his shoulder. As a co-founder of *Scanlan’s Monthly*, he published Hunter S. Thompson’s coverage of the Kentucky Derby, which catapulted Thompson’s writing career.

In March 1967, he wrote a cover story on the hippie movement for *Ramparts*. Hinckle’s account led to Ralph J. Gleason to resign in protest, and go on to found *Rolling Stone*.

**Excerpt**

Hippies are many things, but most prominently the bearded and beaded inhabitants of the Haight-Ashbury, a little psychedelic city-state edging Golden Gate Park. There, in a daily street-fair atmosphere, upwards of 15,000 unbounded girls and boys interact in a tribal, love-seeking, free-swinging, acid-based type of society where, if you are a hippie and you have a dime, you can put it in a parking meter and lie down in the street for an hour’s suntan (30 minutes for a nickel) and most drivers will be careful not to run you over.

Speaking, sometimes all at once, inside the Sierra cabin were many voices of conscience and vision of the Haight-Ashbury—belonging to men who, except for their Raggedy Andy hair, paisley shirts and pre-mod western Levi jackets, sounded for all the world like Young Republicans. They talked about reducing governmental controls, the sanctity of the individual, the need for equality among men. They talked, very seriously, about the kind of society they wanted to live in, and the fact that if they wanted an ideal world they would have to go out and make it for themselves, because nobody, least of all the government, was going to do it for them. The Utopian sentiments of these hippies were not to be put down lightly.

Hippies have a clear vision of the ideal community—a psychedelic community, to be sure—where everyone is turned on and beautiful and loving and happy and floating free. But it is a vision that, despite the Alice in Wonderland phraseology hippies usually breathlessly employ to describe it, necessarily embodies a radical political philosophy: communal life, drastic restriction of private property, rejection of violence, creativity before consumption, freedom before authority, de-emphasis of government and traditional forms of leadership. Despite a disturbing tendency to quietism, all hippies ipso facto have a political posture.