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Hippy Escapism and Counter-Culture in *Grass and Wild Strawberries* by Ukrainian Canadian Playwright George Ryga

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Abstract:

The paper accentuates the negative backwashes of the Hippy Counter Culture movement of the 1960's and bring out the theme of the disgruntlement of the younger generation and its inclination towards the life of hippy escapism in the play *Grass and Wild strawberries* by Ukrainian Canadian Playwright George Ryga.

The Hippy Counter Culture movement of 1960's was concerned with strange beliefs. Hippes care less about the upshots of their actions and rejected the established norms of the society. They slammed the contemporary dominant mainstream culture which they believed was corrupt and wanted to replace it with a utopian society. As a corollary they sought refuge into the hippy world and developed their own Counter-Culture. Their excessive use of drugs, over indulgence in sex and idealistic freedom detaches them from the realities of life, making them unrealistic and impractical.

The play *Grass and Wild strawberries* (1969) touched on a very sensitive issue of the late 1960s and 1970s. A large number of teenagers during the 1960s and 1970s got influenced by the hippy cult of the sixties and seventies. The central protagonists of the play, Allan and Susan renounce their families in pursuit of an idealistic freedom and adopt hippy culture because they are fed up with a life of responsibilities, restrictions and the corrupt ways of the materialistic world around them. They decide to live a free life in absolute harmony with nature. But their pursuit of an idealistic freedom detaches them from the realities of life making them escapists. The dialogic confrontation between Allan and Uncle Ted, his socialist uncle reflects Ryga's disdain for excessive idealism and escapism. Both Susan and Allan also join a band of hippies headed by Captain Nevada. They escape into the world of pantheist mysticism. Both Susan and Allan also join him. However, the encounter of Susan and Allan with their uncle Ted who is a social activist generates questions in the mind of both Susan and Allan regarding the feasibility of hippy cult. The teenagers who turned into hippies were generally criticized as escapists devoid of any social sense and responsibility.

Through the central protagonists of the play, Allan and Susan, attempt has been made to educate the younger generation about the pitfalls of the Hippy Counter Culture movement and encourage them to fight the system instead of escaping the same.

Keywords: Hippy Escapism, Counter Culture and Class Conflict.

The term 'Hippy' had its origin from "Hipster", first coined by Harry Gibson in 1940, in a song titled "Harry the Hipster". The word 'Hippie' is derived from hipster. The Hippy Counter Culture movement of 1960's was concerned with strange beliefs. Hippies care less about the upshots of their actions and rejected the established norms of the society. They slammed the contemporary dominant mainstream culture which they believed was corrupt and wanted to replace it with a utopian society. As a corollary they sought refuge into the hippy world and developed their own counter-culture. Their excessive use of drugs, over indulgence in sex and idealistic freedom detaches them from the realities of life, making them unrealistic and impractical.

The play *Grass and Wild strawberries* (1969) touched on this very sensitive issue of the hippy cult of the sixties and seventies. Through this play, the paper accentuates the negative backwashes of the 'Hippy Counter Culture movement' of the 1960's and bring out the theme of the disgruntlement of the younger generation and its inclination towards the life of hippy escapism.

George Ryga, the Ukrainian Canadian Playwright, Novelist and Poet is considered to be one who helped in creating a Canadian national theatre. George Ryga was an important landmark in Canadian literature. He was born into a family of Ukrainian immigrants (who had arrived in Canada in 1927) in Deep Creek, near Athabasca, Alberta, in 1932. Ryga's writings portray the struggle between 'have and have nots'. His work reflected his childhood experiences near Athabasca. While talking about the sorry plight of the ordinary people and articulating a chorus of working class, Ryga draws upon Marxist ideology. He preferred ordinary people from all cultures, from the folk, the ethnic, who had traditional claims to land. The plays of George Ryga depict a tension between realism and escapism and *Grass and Wild strawberries* depicts this tension at peak. *Grass and Wild strawberries* have been discussed so far in terms of a revolt on the part of the younger generation against the maturity characteristic of their parents and the materialistic values of the modern Canadian society.

The play is discussed in light of the concepts such as hippy escapism, counter-culture, and class conflict. A large number of teenagers during the 1960s and 1970s got influenced by the hippy cult of the sixties and seventies. The central protagonists of the play, Allan and Susan renounce their families in pursuit of an idealistic freedom and adopt hippy culture because they are fed up with a life of responsibilities, restrictions and the corrupt ways of the materialistic world around them. They decide to live a free life in absolute harmony with nature. But their pursuit of an idealistic freedom detaches them from the realities of life making them escapist.

The dialogic confrontation between Allan and Uncle Ted, his socialist uncle reflects Ryga's disdain for excessive idealism and escapism. Both Susan and Allan also join a band of hippies headed by Captain Nevada. They escape into the world of pantheist mysticism. Both Susan and Allan also join him. However, the encounter of Susan and Allan with their uncle Ted who is a social activist generates questions in the mind of both Susan and Allan regarding the feasibility of hippy cult. The teenagers who turned into hippies were generally criticized as escapists devoid of any social sense and responsibility.

But Ryga was well aware of the presence of the traits of 'counter culture' in this movement. He knew that the hippy movement in Canada was influenced by Vietnam War and rising Canadian nationalism. The guppies preferred love over war and rejected materialism for mysticism. But the excessive use of drugs and over indulgence in free sex and physical pleasure was the biggest drawback with hippy culture. They were living as isolated groups and their beliefs remained confined to them only. Therefore the gap between them and the mainstream society kept widening.

James Hoffman in his book *The Ecstasy of Resistance: A Biography of George Ryga* describes how certain Canadian rock bands of 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of counter culture, the war in Vietnam, and rising Canadian nationalism were American dominance. In *Grass and Wild strawberries* the target group was the younger generation and more especially the teenagers. As teenagers were the ones who were most drawn towards the hippy movement and it was really a difficult task to handle the issue of the fast growing involvement of this group with hippy cult. It was making the teens unrealistic and impractical. The hippy movement as a way of resisting the mainstream culture was fine in terms of an ideology. But the biggest drawback with the movement was that it was turning into a compartmentalized struggle. James Hoffman has very aptly written about the problem of this situation in his book *The Ecstasy of Resistance: A Biography of George Ryga*.

The problem was that many others were left out of the dream, such as the aged, the poor, the unemployed, the Rita Joes, plus millions of Third – World people, who conveniently excluded from the "turned-on" existence. Only those with sufficient wealth and security could afford to be true, wandering, "free" hippies, unconcerned with the trivialities of earning wages, paying for food, or struggling with a small pension. As a Marxist Ryga saw an over-indulgence in short-sighted values, those of revolution based on youthful naiveté. There was he knew, faulty class-consciousness: the hippies' vision was emotionally charged but did not encompass a broad view of humanity. It did not, for example, grow out of a fundamental issue like poverty or racism, but out of opposition to war (especially that in Vietnam) and to those who would limit personal freedoms, those who were deemed to be in "establishment" positions (*Hoffman n.pag*).

The concept of Class Conflict is discussed in terms of Marxist ideology. Marx believed that revolution is indispensable in order to bring transformation in the society. Revolution gives birth to new epoch of social history. The revolutionary overthrow of the feudal system as symbolized by the French Revolution (1789), gave rise to the capitalist system. Since the capitalist has fettered new forces of production, it needs to be overthrown by the new revolutionary class – the proletariat class. Marx and Engels made it clear in the concluding part of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848):

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communistic revolution. (Web)

This Marxist ideology is vividly reflected in the play. Uncle Ted in *Grass and Wild strawberries* persuades Allan to fight for freedom and put an end to the private ownership. Both Allan and Susan are not happy with the prevailing capitalist system and instead of beating the system and bringing revolution, they escape into world of hippies. Uncle Ted makes Allan realize that he has forgotten the history of class struggle and has even his survival instinct removed from him. He wants Allan to take stand against the capitalist class. He talks of the revolution which can alone create new life and new system. He says:

History is all that lives on. Never neglect your history or traditions, particularly the revolutionary side of it. For it rages on like a firestorm, devouring its wastes and creating new life ... new social systems on the graves of the old! (*Grass and Wildstrawberries*, 82)

Uncle Ted is trying to make him (Allan) realize that he has a bigger responsibility on his shoulders of transforming the society

Grass and Wild strawberries has a serious message for the younger generation. This message is particularly targeted upon hippies. Many teenagers got misled under the influence of hippism. Some of them even lost the purpose of their existence. Allan says, “I don’t know who I am or why I am!” (90) Susan tells Allan: “I could never live to be thirty. That would be a disaster ... (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 80). They are always full of complaints and have no belief in God. Allan tells Susan, “It’s no use. God is dead ... He won’t answer your trying! His phone is off the receiver and lying on His chest and everyone’s frightened to go in and hang it up ...” (*Grass and Wild strawberries*, 97). The generation gap is also highlighted. They think that their parents are unable to appreciate their needs. Susan deliberately tried to hurt her mother by leaving home on her birthday so that she can celebrate something real next time. She says, “My mother was thirty-five when I left. I remember that good ... I ran away on her birthday.” (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 80)

Allan and Susan represent the teenagers of the 1970s & 80s who got swayed by the hippy cult. They represent the contemporary youth baffled by the system and lacking proper direction

and instead of fighting for their rights feel delighted in escaping from it. Uncle Ted says to Allan, “How confused you’ve become! Your situation and your life-style is abnormal and anti-social. You are like the Gypsy, cut free from the smoke and soot and the Saturday good-time bottle of beer!” (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 94)

They condemn the system imposed on them by their parents and refused to follow any established institution calling it “The Establishment”. Uncle Ted however represents the old class history that always enriches and directs the life of the individuals. He tells Allan that men have the capability to change the history when the latter condemns history. Allan views history as a record of wars and lies and hatred; nation he says cannot develop and gets disappointed to see, civilized men doing injustice to the common people. Uncle Ted draws the attention of Allan to the working class people who dig the water holes and built roads and towns. They too form the history. Uncle Ted says:

I read it the only way I know how ... I couldn’t help it. Life is positive, boy. Revolutions enrich history ... It is not true that for youth of this time all social organizations they have not made and movements they have not struggled in, are oppressive and out of touch ... That is not true. (*Grass and Wildstrawberries* 85)

George Ryga attributes the escapism of the teenagers of 1960s & 70s to the absence of a proper historical perspective. He believed that it was perhaps one of the major causes of the apathy of the younger generation with the wider issues. This note of exigency is present in almost all the plays of George Ryga. This comes out in the play in a dialogue between Uncle Ted a socialist and his hippy nephew Allan, Ted says: “You understand nothing! The historical class struggle has passed you by ... You’ve even had your survival instinct removed from you!” (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 162).

Marx believed that the class conflict will be abolished only by the abolition of the private property. Both Marx and Engels conclude:

When in the course of division, class distinctions have disappeared, and production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another... (Web)

The capitalist class benefits itself by exploiting the labor class. Uncle Ted in the play *Grass and Wildstrawberries* who himself belongs to the working class further tells Allan about the insignificance the labor classes hold for the capitalist class. The working men are mere commodities that are supposed to live only as to eat and recreate commodities. They are mere objects or machines that are used for producing goods and nothing else. But it is for them to raise their voice against the injustice done to them and to raise their level from mere commodity to valuable beings. He claims:

They know what they do---they deliberately attack their commodities—the working man. For we're only commodities, boy, that eat and recreate to produce other commodities ... some get driven to work by a chauffeur, some walk four miles ... I have no illusions about my worth, neither should you. But if we struggle without compromise for a change in the social and economic system, we can win--- and we cease being commodities then. We become full personalities! (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 81-82)

The concluding dialogues of the play *Grass and Wild strawberries* give a critical account of the painful social reality of the working class people who are victimized by the capitalist class with their brutal acts of exploitation. Allan wants to replace the dominant mainstream culture which he believes is inherently flawed and corrupted with an egalitarian and utopian society. The account which he gives of his ideal world highlights the loopholes that exist in the existing system:

Allan: When I am king, men will not live in ridicule!

Captain Nevada: When *we* are kings!

Group: Amen!

Allan: When *I* am king, for every *I* must be liberated before he joins other kings as equals!

Group: Amen!

Allan: When *we* are kings, the good health nurses shall be rewarded with organically grown apples and cherries, and the bad ones shall have a hot room with no door!

Captain Nevada: Friends who are talkers and no listeners!

Group: Amen!

Allan: All policemen and no prisoners!

Group: Amen!

Captain Nevada: All givers and no takers!

Allan: Eyes for the dying souls!

Susan: Ears with nothing to hear!

Allan: All masks and no faces!

Susan: Roads and no traffic!

Group: Amen! (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 105)

There seems a drastic change in the character of Allan towards the ends of the play *Grass and Wild strawberries*. Earlier he had no belief in God but eventually he talks of painting heaven on beach with God and green grass and wild strawberries in his garden. He says, “.... Today I’ll paint for myself ... I’m painting heaven out there on the beach! I’m painting God ... his digs ... the green grass and wild strawberries in His garden!” (*Grass and Wild strawberries* 105)

He finally decides to get back to the society and understand its contradictions. He says:

It’s too late, Ageless Magnificence! I’m painting the backyards of paradise now, where the slums are ... and the missiles and nuclear bombers.....and my poor uncle eating food from his enemies, like a prisoner of war....of meanness and stupidity...of wings and the groping into the cosmos where loneliness is infinite and man is finally capable of shedding the skin and outlook of the beast...I have to do that today, because my child is God himself, laughing with us and we must not disappoint him again! (Grass)

There seems to be an exchange of identities between Allan and Uncle Ted towards the end of the play. Allan’s catching on his Uncle Ted’s social consciousness and Ted’s remark, that a man should dance when he is young, settles the central conflict of the play.

This paper gives voice to the suppressed and marginalized class that demands for an egalitarian society where every individual holds value and can exercise free will. The paper is an attempt to raise and transform the consciousness of the younger generation and aim at bringing equality in the society.

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