

'New Elizabethans': The Representation of Youth Subcultures in 1950s British Fiction

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One of the main features of British society in the 1950s is the emergence of distinct subcultural groups associated with youth and adolescence. There has been a lot of work carried out in this area mainly with respect to how youth subcultures emerged in the 1950s and their relationship with the 'parent' culture, most notably by some of the cultural commentators and theorists associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies based at Birmingham University.¹ Much of this has focused on the sociological contexts, musical expression, and semiotic representations of these subcultures. However there has been relatively little research done on the way those subcultures were represented in contemporary fiction.² This article aims to address this lack by examining the work of a number of novelists from the period including Colin MacInnes, Alan Sillitoe, Keith Waterhouse and Muriel Spark. In particular I will examine the way in which the Teddy boy subculture was represented and how that compared with its representation in the mainstream media and other writing. I argue that the fiction opens up the rather one-dimensional image produced in the media and some of the other non-fictional work of the period. One of the main youth subcultures that emerge in the 1950s is the Teddy boys and I will focus in particular on the way in which this group was represented in the mainstream press and some other writings before going on to an examination of its representation in selected fiction of the period. The present article brings together research I have already published in this area with new readings of selected fiction and non-fiction related to the subject.³

It is important to begin by stressing that although there was a diverse range of youth and youth cultural forms manifest in Britain in the 1950s that cut across class, ethnicity and gender, the predominant representation of these groups in the

media and sociological analyses focused on white, working-class, male members of those subcultures. Some of these subcultures were home grown, but many were responding to cultural imports especially from the United States and the Caribbean. In particular, the impact of popular cultural forms in music, fashion and film from America supplied British youth with a ready-made alternative to the traditional career development expected by the British 'parent' culture.⁴ In terms of musical form, rock'n'roll and jazz (as well as calypso and skiffle), and films such as *On the Waterfront*, *The Wild One*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock Around the Clock* all provided new fashion styles and attitudes for British youth.⁵ This range of cultural texts and practices offered sites of resistance for youth: resistance both to dominant culture and to the working-class 'parent' culture against which they set themselves.⁶ However, the mainstream media tended to represent youth subcultures as indicative of a general moral and cultural *malaise* and tended to focus on images of criminality, violence and sexual promiscuity. The Teddy boy subculture in particular was demonized in the popular press, which tended to foreground the aura of urban violence that surrounded it, fuelled by reports of specific instances of violent clashes, for example, at the release of the films *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock Around the Clock* in cinemas up and down the country.⁷ Teddy boys were also identified as the main instigators of violence in the so-called 'race' riots that took place in Nottingham and Notting Hill in the summer of 1958.⁸ In addition, and somewhat paradoxically, the association with Americanized popular forms, which themselves relied heavily on black American culture, fuelled the mainstream reaction to the 'immoral' and 'foreign' influences and practices that contemporary youth culture was thought to represent.⁹

It is also important to emphasise that youth culture in the 1950s represented a heterogeneous range of cultural practices, texts and spaces that included attitude, behaviour, cultural locations, music, fashion styles and inter-group relationships. These practices and texts involved different layers of signification in terms of visual and aural culture as well as distinct attitudes, codes of practice and physical spaces, such as dance halls, coffee bars, jazz clubs, and record and clothes shops. These marginalized spaces represented the sites where a variety of youth subcultures could form and interact with each other. Within these subcultural spaces and texts a variety of (sub-) subcultures identified themselves along points of difference: the Teddy boys and 'teenagers', jazz fans (including 'mod' and 'trad' varieties), as well the hipsters, and those associated with Beat culture.¹⁰

Despite this diverse range of youth subcultures in Britain in the 1950s, the mainstream media tended to focus on the most visible aspects of youth culture, which tended to produce a simplified dichotomy of the demonization of youth alongside counter claims of the ordinary and commendable qualities of 'most' young people. However, it is clear that this is an unequal dichotomy: the number of reports demonizing the Teddy boys far outstrip those attempting to focus on positive images of youth subcultures.¹¹ This contrasting representation of youth subcultures can be seen in two news reports from *The Times* from the mid-1950s. The name 'Teddy boy' began to emerge as a distinct subcultural identity in the

early 1950s, and the first mention in the *Times* appears on 25 June 1954 in a report headed 'Initials Carved on Arms of Schoolmates':

A 13-year-old boy who established a reign of terror and carved the initials T.B. (Teddy Boy) with a knife on the arms of four schoolmates burst into tears at West London Juvenile Court yesterday when told he was going to be sent to an approved school. The boy was before the court for assault – carving the initials.¹²

Although reporting only one instance, this article can be seen as defining metaphorically the way in which the Teddy boys were perceived during the period. The 'reign of terror' and the idea of Teddy boy culture being cut literally into the flesh of innocent victims provides a powerful image for the way in which the spectre of the delinquent youngster gets carved into the collective psyche of 1950s mainstream culture. From 1954 onwards, the number of references to Teddy boys increases rapidly, the term often being associated with any kind of juvenile 'delinquency'. In fact the term becomes shorthand for any identification of teenage, or adolescent delinquency.¹³ As Stanley Cohen argues, the Teddy boys 'were perceptually merged into a day-to-day delinquency problem.'¹⁴

Although this is the dominant image of Teddy boys circulating in the 1950s, there were a few contrasting representations in the popular press. For example, an article a year later than the one quoted above, entitled 'New Elizabethans', reports that:

Mr George Isaacs, M.P., said in opening the Dulwich College Mission's 'Teen Canteen' for young people at the Elephant and Castle, S.E., last night: 'Teddy boys are youngsters with youthful spirits who like to have their own kind of clothes. There are bad ones among them here and there, but you will find darn fine lads in Edwardian clothes going to the Boys' Brigade and the Sea Cadets. The name Teddy boy is beginning to stink; I would rather call them 'the New Elizabethans.'¹⁵

George Isaacs was a Labour M.P. in the 1950s (during a Conservative government) and he probably had political motives for playing down the emergence of delinquent youth subcultures in his constituency. Nevertheless, his comments are particularly interesting in the way they challenge the prevailing representations of youth. In Isaacs's speech, 'youthful spirits' and 'darn fine lads' replace the term 'delinquent' that often attends the reports of the Teddy boys' violent or criminal behaviour. Revealed also is an awareness of the way in which the naming of a group has ideological issues – the 'stink' Isaacs refers to that has gathered around the name 'Teddy boy' is precisely a media-created association, which he wants to replace by a term that has nationalistic and inclusionary connotations. The 'New Elizabethans' he suggests incorporates a sense in which the new and still youthful queen represents a small part of the very 'youth' culture from which the Teddy boys have sprung. Suffice it to say that Isaacs's epithet does not catch on, whereas there are over 170 references to 'Teddy boys' in *The Times* alone between 1954 and 1959, most of which are pejorative.

Taken together, these two articles encapsulate something of the oscillating (and one could say dialectical) representations of youth in the 1950s: one that seeks to demonize criminal behaviour and represent youth as something unsettling and transgressive, and one that attempts to re-incorporate youth into mainstream society and thereby contain any criminal and potentially subversive behaviour. It is in this context that much of the representation of youth subcultures in the 1950s operates, especially in the period after 1950.

This is not, of course, the first decade in which youth becomes associated with delinquency. However, there is a particular coming together of lifestyle, codes of behaviour and fashion that mark out the period as a new representation of youth, one that identifies individual subcultures within youth and associates those subcultures with broader cultural concerns such as the break-up of empire, immigration, and Americanization. As in the Isaacs quotation referred to above, the mark of difference that the Teddy boys produced was stylistic and sartorial as much as it was behavioural. The Teddy boys were not the only youth subculture that emerged during the period; however, it is the case that they were the most visible in terms of media representation. It is also the case that reports of teenage delinquency abound in early 1950s British newsprint, but it is only after the coining of the term 'Teddy boy' in 1953, that 'delinquency' is attached to a particular subculture within youth.¹⁶ In this sense, the Teddy boy acted as a cultural signifier of demarcation that separated the delinquent teenager from other adolescents.

Alongside the demonization in the mainstream media there is another body of work produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s that addressed itself to analysing the causes and motivations behind contemporary youth behaviour. Much of this was produced in the early cultural studies and sociological work associated with the British New Left. This group emerged in the late 1950s and included relatively young academics, intellectuals and cultural commentators who were influenced by Marxist theories, but who wished to distance themselves from the Soviet Union and communism following Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party in 1953, and the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956.¹⁷ This group included cultural thinkers, historians and literary critics such as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and, on the margins, Richard Hoggart, Colin MacInnes and Alan Sillitoe.¹⁸ The group was interested in the way that the 1950s economic boom was changing established frameworks of social class in both cultural and political terms, and, in particular, how this trend was affecting youth.¹⁹ The New Left journal *Universities and New Left Review* was a prime site for the articulation of these ideas, and as Greta Duncan and Roy Wilkie observed of the way in which youth was being represented in the mainstream media: 'Teenagers are accused not only of lacking a sense of responsibility, but of having no respect for their elders [...] It is striking that most people talk of teenagers in negative terms.'²⁰ They aimed to counter this misrepresentation by carrying out a survey of Glasgow teenagers. This was one of a series of articles that appeared in this journal in the late 1950s.²¹ Stuart Hall, in particular, noted that the 'problem' of youth

was associated with the changing historical contexts in which 1950s young people found themselves, and that their political sensibilities were affected by a new sense of individualism that was fuelled by post-war patterns of consumerism. As Hall writes, 'Instinctively, young working class people are radical. They hate the stuffiness of the class system, though they cannot give it a political name [...] they feel and experience these things in private, emotional ways, for this is how adolescents encounter the world.'²² The attempt to understand and establish social and political contexts for the rise of youth culture offers an interesting contrast to the predominantly negative images presented in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, it is clear that the New Left writers tended to refer to 'teenagers' and avoid the loaded term 'Teddy boys'.

The one writer associated with the New Left who did discuss the Teddy boys directly was Richard Hoggart in his key 1956 work *The Uses of Literacy*, in which he cites them as indicative of a general cultural malaise. He refers to them as 'barbarians in wonderland' signalling both their lack of cultural knowledge despite the relatively affluent society in which they existed (compared to the depression of the 1930s and the austerity and rationing of the 1940s and early 1950s).²³ Hoggart is keen to emphasize the detrimental effects on British youth of the processes of cultural Americanization, which in his view is resulting in the deterioration of an older, 'organic' working-class culture.²⁴ In particular, he describes the Teddy boys in the 'milk bars' as 'less intelligent than the average, and therefore even more exposed to the debilitating mass-trends of the day'²⁵. Hoggart is unsure whether to blame the youthful individuals themselves for rejecting older working-class culture, or the superficial appeal of the Americanized culture to which these groups were (mistakenly, in his view) attracted. Hoggart develops his reading of contemporary youth as a group who are politically apathetic, and stimulated only on a surface level by shallow consumerism and products designed to appeal to their limited powers of critical judgement. In a section from *The Uses of Literacy* entitled 'The Juke Box Boys', Hoggart produces a description of the milk bars in which he observes youth in the following terms:

this is all a thin and pallid sort of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers – their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial expressions all indicate – are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life.²⁶

Here Hoggart focuses on what he perceives to be their debased culture, manifest in a range of stylistic signifiers. However, Hoggart's observation of youth culture is far from objective and is in fact a component of his broader agenda in *The Uses of Literacy* of celebrating traditional working-class culture, a tradition that he considers is under threat from new economic and cultural forces. His interpretation of youth, therefore, is representative of his aim, as Hebdige observes, to 'preserv[e] the "texture" of working-class life against the bland allure of post-war affluence – television, high wages, and consumerism.'²⁷ This position was felt to be neces-

sary because of the perceived threat of invasive forms of consumer culture coming across the Atlantic. As Dominic Strinati has pointed out, Hoggart was worried that: “genuine” working-class community [was] in the process of being dissolved into cultural oblivion by mass culture and Americanization.²⁸

Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* is an important and engaging text of the period, but it did little to challenge the mainstream representation of youth culture, and the Teddy boys in particular. It is in some of the fiction of the period that a more complicated and ambivalent representation of 1950s youth is revealed. In what follows I will discuss this diversity of representation in four late-fifties novels, each of which has a distinctive engagement with the debates on teenage and youth subcultures during the period. There are two sections, the first of which discusses the representation of Teddy boys in Colin MacInnes’s *Absolute Beginners* and Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*; whilst the second focuses on Keith Waterhouse’s *Billy Liar* and Muriel Spark’s *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. This is, of course, not a complete list of the many novels that discuss issues of youth in the 1950s, however, they represent a good sample of the differing attitudes and positions revealed during the period.²⁹

Some of the fiction of the period goes beyond the one-dimensional view of youth culture found in both the mainstream media and more serious cultural commentary like Hoggart’s. One telling example is Colin MacInnes’ 1959 novel, *Absolute Beginners* which covers much of the same ground as Hoggart and the New Left, but provides a richer and more diverse representation of youth culture. As we have seen, one of the problems with Hoggart’s analysis is that it constructs a subculture of ‘youth’ as a homogenous group, which is then interpreted in relation to the dominant or ‘parent’ culture. This is also the approach adopted by later cultural studies analyses of youth. Phil Cohen, for example, in his work on white working-class youth in 1950s London argues that youth culture reveals the same anxieties as the parent culture, in terms of a strong sense of territorialization, but in different forms of representation.³⁰

MacInnes’ *Absolute Beginners* offers a diverse representation of youth by identifying multiple subcultures within the term. There are representations of the emerging Mod subculture (although this description had not yet been coined when *Absolute Beginners* was published), ‘trad’ and ‘mod’ jazz followers, Teddy boys, as well as the more popular ‘teenager’ subculture. This diversity contrasts with the singular definition of youth in Cohen’s and Hoggart’s writing and achieves a complexity that is lacking in early New Left writing on youth generally. MacInnes was a journalist as well as a novelist and in *Absolute Beginners* he brings his journalistic impulse to the representation of a series of characters associated with different aspects of youth culture. His motivation for this is twofold: firstly, he wanted to counter some of the demonizing rhetoric that was associated with youth during the period and comment on the radical potential of youth to challenge dominant culture in a positive way; secondly, he wanted to identify potentially disturbing elements within youth culture that tended towards violence and racism.³¹ In terms of the latter aim, one of the main contexts for *Absolute Beginners* is the so called race

'riot' in Notting Hill in July 1958, an event that is incorporated into the action of the novel.

In terms of narrative technique, the novel adopts the narrative voice of a teenager (who remains anonymous) which allows MacInnes to produce a novel in which youth appears to speak for itself. The unnamed teenage narrator acts as a guide through the subcultural world of the novel identifying a variety of aspects of youth culture and imposing his own ethical codes upon the range of ways in which youth is presented as operating. The Teddy boys, for example, are represented not as the main voice of youth, but as a definite group within youth, a sub-subculture as it were, and a group who are castigated by the main teenage voice, a move that replicates mainstream culture's anxieties concerning some of the behaviour of the Teds. The one main Teddy boy character, 'Ed the Ted', is presented as a violent, yet weak, and ultimately comic figure who is mocked by the teenager; a representation that supports the prevailing image of delinquency, criminality and mindless acts of violence:

I should explain ... that Edward and I were born and bred ... within a bottle's throw of each other off the Harrow road in Kilburn Then, when the Ted-thing became all the range, Edward signed up for the duration ... the full-fledged Teddy-boy condition – slit eyes, and cosh, and words of one syllable, and dirty finger-nails and all According to the tales Ed told me, when he left his jungle occasionally and crossed the frontier into civilized sections of the city and had a coffee with me, he lived the high old life, brave, bold and splendid, smashing crockery in all-night cafes and crowning distinguished colleagues with tyre levers in *cul-de-sacs* and parking lots, and even appearing in a telly programme on the Ted question where he stared photogenically, and only grunted.³²

This passage identifies a number of characteristics that are common to the representation of Teddy boy subculture generally in the 1950s. The intimation of Ed's lack of intelligence, his celebration of violence and the way in which his cultural identity is performed outwardly through mannerism are all stock images of the Teds. It also suggests that the location of Teddy boy culture is clearly demarcated in certain working-class regions of London (Kilburn in this case). It is out of these areas that Ed occasionally travels to meet with the teenager and the use of the distinction between 'jungle' and 'civilization' in the passage enforces this idea. In addition, we get the sense that much of the violence occurs within the subculture, as rival Teddy boy gangs compete over territory: it is 'colleagues' that Ed fights with, which is meant to refer to other members of the same subculture, if not the same gang within that subculture. There is also the recognition of the overdetermined media interest that the Teds have caused, and an implicit sense in which the visibility of Teddy boy violence and delinquency is part of the misrepresentation of youth generally. Later in the novel, the teenager reads a report of the riots at Nottingham in which the Teddy boys were blamed for instigating the violence against black immigrants are described as 'psychopathic cases, in greater need of medical attention than of drastic punishment'.³³ The tenor of this fictional article blames the immigrants for implicitly provoking the violence perpetrated on them by the white Teddy boys,

and it is clear that the teenager is outraged by the misrepresentation of the facts. However, he is less worried about the way in which the Teds are stereotypically portrayed and fails to recognise the way that, as Rock and Cohen put it, the Teddy boys became 'a scapegoat for respectable British Society to cover up its own failures and prejudices in dealing with its immigrant population'.³⁴

MacInnes' novel then reclaims teenagers and youth subcultures from the accusation of delinquency and violence by using the first-person narration of the teenager, whose sensible, cool and intelligent take on the contemporary culture in which he is placed supplies what appears to be an authentic analysis and an attractive representation of youth. This is achieved, in part, by pluralizing the subcultural identities of youth in the 1950s. In doing this however, the Teddy boys become the repositories of that part of youth subculture that is perceived to be delinquent. The representation of Ted culture in MacInnes' book is not too far from the mainstream media demonization. In fact, in the context of the 1950s it provides further 'evidence' of what would be perceived as the very real delinquency of this group. Although MacInnes' text is a fictional representation of youth subcultures it carries a sense of authenticity, mainly because it purports to be an honest account of youth from the inside, articulated in a voice that appears to be appropriate to that cultural location. This is not to say that MacInnes' teenager speaks in a voice that is absolutely authentic, but one which 'signifies' authenticity. The text does not transparently 'reflect' the language style used by 1950s teenage subcultures, but re-constructs, in a textual form, a style of language that consciously marks itself as different from dominant or prevailing codes of speech. The voice of the teenager thus carries with it extra weight as it avoids the distancing effect of media and cultural commentary where the reporter and writer are perceived to be external to the culture that is being described.³⁵

In opposition to the Teddy boys, MacInnes' teenager is attracted to the 1950s jazz subculture. Although he is most often described as an outsider, he may be said to be part of the emergence of a new, more sophisticated subculture that follows jazz and will eventually form what Mike Brake defines as the 'mainstream' mods in the early 1960s.³⁶ For the teenager, and presumably for MacInnes, the jazz world represents the possibility of a utopian subculture that evades both the codes of behaviour associated with mainstream, adult culture, and the delinquency (and racism) of the Teddy boys. The importance of musical and fashion styles as signifying ideological positions is crucial in *Absolute Beginners*, and corresponds to Dick Hebdige's understanding of the role of aesthetics in youth subcultures.³⁷ Jazz, for MacInnes' teenager, represents a subversive spirit that idealistically circumvents all prejudices of class, age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality that are seen to be part of mainstream British culture:

But the great thing about the jazz world, and all the kids that enter into it, is that no one, not a soul, cares what your class is, or what your race is, or what your income, or if you're boy, or girl, or bent, or versatile, or what you are – so long as you behave yourself, and have left all that crap behind you, too, when you come in the jazz club door.³⁸

MacInnes here projects a radical construction of community that incorporates differences in class, 'race', gender and sexual orientation, and represents what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia.³⁹ For Foucault, a heterotopic space is one that carries with it idealistic and utopian significance which exceeds realistic contexts, but still occupies a location in the real world. Jazz clubs existed as real spaces in the 1950s, and although MacInnes' teenager is certainly romanticizing them, they nevertheless had the potential to point to an idealized meaning that removed social discrimination in a society where prejudice was seen to be a fact of life.

The contrast between the jazz (and emergent Mod) subculture and the Teddy boys is also registered in terms of a critical discernment in relation to musical style. Whereas jazz is understood by the teenager as a technical form of music that is complex enough to be incorporated into a high cultural paradigm, rock'n'roll is most often assumed to be a simple form of music that generates its subcultural meaning through loudness and its intensity. In this way, MacInnes reconfigures rather than dissolves a high/low cultural divide. This understanding of the cultural evaluation of differing forms of music is not only present in MacInnes' text, but is a feature of much of the work done on 1950s subcultures. The Teddy boys have often been referred to as emerging from the *lumpen* working class, and given their lack of educational achievements it is assumed that they will not be able to evaluate the technical quality of the music they listen to.⁴⁰ Rather the assumption is that they respond in a physical (and aggressively physical) way to the music that becomes associated with that subculture. Indeed rock'n'roll has most often been represented by cultural commentators as simple, volume-based music, that does not require the aesthetic discrimination associated with the Mods.⁴¹ Brake, for example, describes rock as 'physical and unchanging, making no demands on intellect or knowledge of melodic craft ... Rock is body music, simple and yet highly aggressive.'⁴² Stanley Cohen, who is in many ways sympathetic to the 'plight' of the Teddy boys also assumes that an uncritical response to the music is a feature of Teddy boy culture: he refers, for example, to 'the loud excesses of rock.'⁴³ In fact, he argues that this is one of the antagonisms that the Rockers felt in the later development of resentments between them and the Mods (although he does suggest that there was an element within the Teddy boy subculture that developed into the Mod subculture in the early 1960s, especially the emphasis on style and appearance).

MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* is probably the text that most directly addresses the rise of youth subcultures in the 1950s. However some of the most memorable images of male youth in British fiction (and film) of the period comes from the fiction of Alan Sillitoe. In two texts in particular Sillitoe examines the experiences and inner thoughts of young, northern, working-class men. In the novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* Sillitoe introduces us to Arthur Seaton, a hard-working and hard-drinking factory worker just into his twenties; and in the short story 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner', the younger Colin Smith is a borstal boy who attempts to use all the powers he has to frustrate the attempt by dominant society to curb his free spirit.⁴⁴ Neither of these characters can be said to be part of a subculture such as the Teddy boys although they are clearly constructed to register

in the public imagination with the representation of delinquent youth in the 1950s.⁴⁵ Arthur Seaton in Sillitoe's 1958 novel (and as portrayed by Albert Finney in Karel Reisz film adaptation in 1960) is particularly interesting in this context.

Although Arthur is presented as an individualist throughout the text he negotiates two competing forces in his *Bildungsroman* narrative: the working class of his parents' generation, and the new consumerist boom of the late 1950s. Arthur attempts to maintain his independence, but the text shows the ways in which contemporary understandings of youth culture impinge on his identity. In the opening chapter of the book he is described by one character in the following terms: 'Looks like one of them Teddy boys, allus making trouble'⁴⁶. This accusation follows a drunken fall down a flight of stairs in a pub, which subsequently leads to him vomiting over a middle-aged man. It is the wife of this man who labels Arthur a Teddy boy, an accusation to which he responds by vomiting over her too, this time directly in her face. This powerful opening scene sets some of the ground for the representation of youth in the novel. The scene takes place on a Saturday night, 'the best and bingiest gladtime of the week'⁴⁷ and thematically at the height of the young man's excessive and irresponsible behaviour. This opening moment also has significance in terms of the way collective and individual identity act as competing forces in Arthur's subsequent development into adulthood. The imposition of the identity of 'Teddy boy', is seen to be from an external source and voiced by a member of the mainstream parent culture – a working-class wife. In a novel that, as Lynne Segal has noted, upholds discourses of masculinity through Arthur's attitudes to women and marriage, this woman represents all the forces that attempt to contain Arthur within certain prescribed categories.⁴⁸ The vomiting is thus a metaphorical representation of Arthur's violent resistance to those forces of containment. Arthur is not a Teddy boy in the sense of his belonging to a subculture – there is no mention in the text of his musical preferences or his belonging to any Teddy boy gang – his behaviour, however, is categorized by this representative of mainstream society by adopting the prevailing delinquent identity in the late 1950s. It is Arthur's sense of individualism that resists this label.

It is the case, however, that Arthur engages with some of the cultural expressions of late 1950s youth. There is a description, for example, of his emotional and pecuniary investment in clothing:

Upstairs he flung his greasy overalls aside and selected a suit from a line of hangers. Brown paper protected them from dust, and he stood for some minutes in the cold, digging his hands into pockets and turning back lapels, sampling the good hundred pounds' worth of property hanging from an iron-bar. These were his riches, and he told himself that money paid out on clothes was a sensible investment because it made him feel good as well as look good. He took a shirt from another series of hangers near the window and slipped it over his soiled underwear.⁴⁹

This passage reveals a number of contexts for the signification of clothes in youth culture in the 1950s, and particularly in the interpretation of Teddy boy style in the early 1950s. As many commentators have noted, the Teddy boys adopted the

clothing that was originally intended for young, upper-class men, with Saville Row tailors developing the style in the early 1950s (and soon dropping it, when it became apparent that young working-class thugs had adopted the look). Tony Jefferson reads this adoption of style as representative of a paradoxically aspirational desire by Teddy boys: a group who were destined for lower paid jobs and manual labour. Jefferson writes: 'I see this choice of uniform as, initially, an attempt to buy status Their dress represented a symbolic way of expressing and negotiating with their social reality; of giving cultural *meaning* to their social plight'.⁵⁰ Hebdige advances this reading by suggesting that, 'He [the Teddy boy] visibly bracketed off the drab routines of school, the job and home by affecting an exaggerated style'.⁵¹ Arthur Seaton's relationship with his clothing matches these readings of Teddy boy subculture. For Arthur, the value of the clothing is emphasized in two ways: economically and stylistically. Being from a solid working-class environment, he recognizes the value for money that the clothes represent, despite the relatively high amount of his earnings he has paid out in accumulating his wardrobe. The focus on the lapels in the passage from the novel above suggests that the suits Arthur owns are of the style worn by the Teddy boys, whose preference was for longer lapels. Sillitoe, however, frames the material context in which this sartorial quality operates. The suits hang from an 'iron-bar' suggesting the industrial, working-class context on which Arthur's sartorial discernment is supported. The greasy overalls that are set aside represent the partial throwing off of the conditions of work that have funded the aspirational clothing, nevertheless the 'soiled underwear' on which the quality clothes are overlaid suggest that the material base of his labour underpins the super-structural surface that Arthur displays to the world in his moments of leisure.

Like Arthur Seaton, Billy Fisher, the central character in Waterhouse's novel *Billy Liar*, pursues his coming-of-age narrative by negotiating established narratives of identity in a northern, working-class city, with new and fluid models of identity on offer which were directed specifically at youth. Billy copes with this difficult process of identity formation by slipping into a fantasy world that is made up of what he calls No. 1 thinking, which represents delusions of grandeur and ambition; and No. 2 thinking, which contains his anxieties about family, work and sexual relationships. This fantasy world tends to seep into his real life, hence his nickname: Billy Liar. Like *Absolute Beginners*, *Billy Liar* is narrated in the first-person taking the perspective of the eponymous hero (or anti-hero) of the book. This allows Waterhouse to describe the experiences of a representative member of youth culture from the inside as well as presenting the diversity of people within this cultural location. The result is that, although there is a sense in which an ironic distance is often established towards Billy, his experience is represented as authentic, and consequently, the reader is more likely to empathise with the character's situation. Despite Billy's fantasist tendencies, therefore, the reader is persuaded to trust those sections in which he describes the contemporary youth culture to which he has immediate access.

Unlike Arthur Seaton in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night Sunday Morning*, Billy Fisher is lower-middle class rather than working class, as he works as a clerk in an

Undertaker's Office and his father owns a small garage. However, Billy regards himself as on the margins of mainstream, middle-class, 'parent' society and his critical distance from it is emphasized. In this way, he represents a kind of insider-outsider figure that is common in much of the state of the nation writing of the period.⁵² There is one particularly interesting scene in which a typical 1950s coffee bar (and implicitly Teddy boy subculture) is described, a description that contrasts with the representation of a similar cultural space in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* quoted above:

The Kit-Kat was now a coffee bar, or thought it was. It had a cackling espresso machine, a few empty plant-pots, and about half a dozen glass plates with brown sugar stuck all over them. The stippled walls, although redecorated, remained straight milkbar: a kind of Theatre Royal backcloth showing Dick Whittington and his cat hiking it across some of the more rolling dales. Where the coffee-bar element really fell down, however, was in the person of Rita, on whom I was now training the sights of my anxiety. With her shiny white overall, her mottled blonde hair, and her thick red lips, she could have transmogrified the Great Northern Hotel itself into a steamy milkbar with one wipe of her tea-cloth.⁵³

In this extract, Billy's narrative provides an intelligence and wit that exceeds Hoggart's blanket description of the juke-box boys and allows him to provide a greater insight into the characters who occupy this cultural location. Waterhouse is keen to show the artificial imposition of an essentially foreign culture on the traditional urban setting in the north of England as shown in the juxtaposition of the cultural signifiers: the espresso machine, the stippled walls, and the references to pantomime and the Yorkshire Dales. Waterhouse has no illusions about the kitsch artificiality of the milkbar environment, however, the comic energy extends the reader's sympathies to individuals in this location.⁵⁴ Billy is presented as a thoughtful observer, and despite the comic description of Rita, she later emerges as a strong character with a distinct identity (as does Billy's friend Arthur later in the same chapter). The characters peopling Waterhouse's milkbars, unlike those in Hoggart's homogenizing descriptions, are provided with personalities, and although Billy's internal narration positions him to a certain extent as an external observer, he is still part of the subculture being described. Waterhouse is also more aware of gender differences in youth culture. In the passage above, the focus on Rita's appearance parallels the juxtaposition of cultural signs seen in the milkbar's decoration. Her 'mottled blonde hair, and her thick red lips' represent the adoption of a 'foreign' set of cultural codes associated more with American film stars than Yorkshire waitresses, an appearance that is made comic through the reference to the 'tea-cloth' highlighting the irony of her pretensions to sophistication.

Representatives of youth also appear in Muriel Spark's 1960 novel, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*.⁵⁵ In the same way that Ed the Ted acts as a contrast to the teenager in *Absolute Beginners*, the Teddy boy Trevor Lomas in Spark's playful novel is contrasted with the subversive main character Dougal Douglas. Spark's style, however, is very different from MacInnes, Sillitoe and Waterhouse in that the

main character remains an enigmatic outsider figure, who although young operates more in a hyperreal context as a destabilizing, almost devilish force that threatens to undermine mainstream culture. In fact, Trevor Lomas, the Teddy boy figure in Spark's novel, is representative of the prevailing dominant culture rather than a potentially subversive threat to it. There is a description of a ballroom dance in one section of the novel that presents conventional images of youth culture whilst also commenting on the performative aspects of gendered identity as represented in youth culture.⁵⁶ In the following quotation, Beauty is the name of the girl Trevor Lomas is pursuing at this point in the text:

On a midsummer night Trevor Lomas walked with a somnambulistic sway into Findlater's Ballroom and looked round for Beauty. The floor was expertly laid and polished. The walls were pale rose, with concealed lighting. Beauty stood on the girl's side, talking to a group of very similar and lustrous girls. They had prepared themselves for this occasion with diligence, and as they spoke together, they did not smile much nor attend to each other's words. As an accepted thing, any of the girls might break off in the middle of a sentence, should a young man approach her, and turning to him, might give him her entire and smiling regard.⁵⁷

Spark's description differs from those found in Hoggart, MacInnes and Sillitoe in that there is more of an emphasis of the description of female behaviour within this particular subcultural space. Spark is sensitive to the way in which youth culture is coded along gender lines that reinforce patriarchal power relationships. Most of the other fiction focussed on youth culture, particularly that associated with Angry Young Men writers like Sillitoe and MacInnes, tends to reinforce these gender positions, as Lynne Segal and others have noted.⁵⁸ Beauty's behaviour and her relationship with other women is determined solely by Trevor, whose subcultural status is identified by his appearance, behaviour and, later, Dougal's parody of the kind of language associated with Teddy boys. At the dance referred to above, Trevor summons Beauty, his date for the evening, with the words: 'Come and wriggle, snake'⁵⁹, a style of speaking that is later mocked by Dougal ('Come and leap, leopard'; 'Got a pain, panda'; 'Feeling frail, nightingale?'⁶⁰). Trevor responds to Dougal's mockery in a stereotypical Teddy boy way by focusing on Dougal's apparent lack of masculinity, a conflict which eventually results in Dougal challenging Trevor to a fight on the 'Rye', the place demarcated by the community in the novel for transgressive behaviour.⁶¹

Trevor is a representative of conventional working-class culture in the text despite his 'type', the aggressive working-class Teddy boy, being perceived as a threat to the parent society from which he comes. There seems to be a correspondence between Spark's representation of Trevor and Hoggart's anxieties over youth culture as representative of a new and insidious form of commodity-fetishized, working-class society. Compare, for example, the similarity between Hoggart's description of young males cited above with Spark: 'Most of the men looked as if they had not properly woken from deep sleep, but glided as if drugged, and with half closed lids, towards their chosen partner'⁶². It is not difficult to equate the dream-like state

in which these examples of youth culture are described and the ideological false consciousness with which Hoggart imbues the 'juke-box boys'.⁶³ Far from being radical, youth culture is presented by Spark as part of the overall nexus of conventional, stultifying behaviour.

However, Spark's representation of youth culture is more intriguing than Hoggart's. One remarkable passage that reveals this complexity is the fight scene on the Rye. Here, Trevor, Dougal, and a group of other young people have gathered to engage in a pre-arranged fight. However, just as the fight is starting they are disturbed by policemen. Instigated by the character Elaine, the fight unexpectedly turns into a mock dance or 'jive'. The shift from fight to jive, though, is presented with an element of uncanniness, foregrounding the strangeness of both forms of behaviour:

The confusion stopped. Elaine started to sing in the same tone as her screaming, joylessly, and as if in continuation of it. The other girls, seeming to take a signal from her, sidled their waifs into a song In a few seconds everyone except Dougal was singing, performing the twisting jive, merging the motions of the fight into those of the frantic dance.⁶⁴

This transformation of fight into jive, signalled by the arrival of the police, represents a symbolic containment of the transgressive forces of violence and turns it into the fake pleasure of the 'frantic dance'. However, the dance is presented as joyless, artificial and ultimately macabre ('Dougal saw Humphrey's face as his neck swooped upwards. It was frightened'⁶⁵). The dance is presented not as part of a youth culture of resistance, but as a simulation of excess; an excess that is paradoxically re-contained by the surveillance of official power. Seen in this light, the initial fight also becomes part of a stock reaction to a repeatable set of social circumstances. Dougal agrees to fight Trevor because that is how he is expected to behave. Youth culture is represented in the novel as responding in stereotypically ways. However, Spark is not simply reproducing these stereotypes, but showing that people's reactions to social situations follow already established codes of behaviour, often ritualistically. In this sense, Trevor Lomas is the main representative of a youth culture that has the veneer of subversion and transgression, but in fact operates as an additional force in the continuation of prevailing ideological power relationships.

As we have seen, youth in 1950s fiction produces a more heterogeneous mix of representation than the predominantly pejorative image portrayed in the mainstream media and much of the non-fiction produced by writers associated with the New Left. That youth becomes a recurring topic of interest in the fiction also signals a broader social and cultural interest in the group. The later 1950s in particular can be seen as the beginning of a new understanding of youth that moves from an individualized transitional process from childhood to adulthood to the idea of youth as subculture, or indeed a range of subcultures often competing within the general category of youth. Fiction plays an important part in this process and continues to do so into the 1960s and up to the present.

Notes

1 See, for example, the essays collected in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds) *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London, 1976).

2 There has been some work done in this area, especially on the writer Colin MacInnes, who is one of the main contributors to the representation of youth in fiction in the 1950s. See, for example, Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950–1995* (London and New York, 1996), pp. 89–94; and Alice Ferrebe, *Masculinity in Male-Authored Fiction 1950–2000* (Basingstoke and New York, 2005), pp. 139–51. See also my own work in this area in *Radical Fictions: British Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford, 2005), which covers some of the same ground as the present article.

3 See Bentley, *Radical Fictions*; Nick Bentley, ‘Cruel Britannia: Translating Englishness in Colin MacInnes’ *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*’ in *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, 13:1–2 (2003–04), 149–69; and Nick Bentley, ‘The Young Ones: A Reassessment of the British New Left’s Representation of Youth Subcultures’ in *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8:1 (2005), 65–83.

4 I am using ‘parent’ culture here in the sense Phil Cohen uses the term to distinguish it from ‘youth’ culture in his important early analysis of youth subcultures: Phil Cohen, ‘Sub-Cultural Conflict and Working-class Community’, in *The Subcultures Reader*, Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (eds) (London and New York, 1997), pp. 90–99.

5 See Alan Sinfield’s discussion of the importance of these youth cultural forms in the 1950s as sites for radical British youth, ‘Making a Scene’, Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 152–81.

6 Here, I am using Sinfield’s model of dominant, subordinate and radical distinctions within a specific historical culture (*Ibid.*, p. 34), and allying it with the distinctions developed in much New Left writing on working-class youth subcultures between ‘youth’ and ‘parent’ cultures (for example, in Cohen, ‘Sub-Cultural Conflict and Working-class Community’).

7 See Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 153–4; and Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake: The Growth of a Counter-Culture Through Two Decades* (London, 1973), p. 2.

8 See ‘A Habit of Violence’, *Universities and Left Review*, 5 (1958), 4.

9 See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York, 1987); in particular, the section ‘Hipsters, beats and teddy boys’, which discusses the relationship between black American subcultures and musical styles and their importation to Britain in the 1950s (pp. 46–54). See also Paul Gilroy and Errol Lawrence, ‘Two-Tone Britain: White and Black Youth and the Politics of Ant-Racism’, in *Multi-Racist Britain*, Philip Cohen and Harwant S. Bains (eds) (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 121–55.

10 See Hebdige, *Subculture*, pp. 46–51. Colin MacInnes describes the differences between some of these distinct subcultures in Colin MacInnes’ 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*, Colin MacInnes (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 70–71.

11 This demonization is a feature of the media representation of youth subcultures that carries on into the 1960s and beyond as Stanley Cohen has eloquently shown in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 3rd ed. (London and New York, 2002).

12 *The Times*, 25 June 1952, p. 3.

13 References to teenage delinquents abound in *The Times* in the years 1950–1954, and although this description is not removed in the later 1950s, the use of ‘Teddy boy’ (and often ‘Teddy boy delinquents’) appears to localize delinquency onto a specific youth subculture. The Teddy boys, of course, were more easily identified as working class, and thus avoided the taint delinquency might have for children of all classes.

14 Cohen, *Folk Devils*, p. 151.

15 *The Times*, 21 June 1955, 12.

16 Tony Jefferson cites an article from the *Daily Mirror* in October 1953 as establishing the image of the Teddy boy for the mainstream population. Jefferson, 'Cultural Responses', p. 85.

17 See Peter Sedgwick, 'Introduction: Farewell Grosvenor Square', in David Widgery (ed.), *The Left in Britain: 1956–1968* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 19–41.

18 I have written previously on the character of the New Left representation of youth culture in the 1950s. See Bentley, 'The Young Ones'.

19 The range of texts concerned with the issue of 'youth' culture in the 1950s and early 1960s from cultural commentators associated with the New Left include Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* [1957] (Harmondsworth, 1958); Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961); and a particularly interesting set of articles in *Universities and Left Review*, Vol. 4 in the summer of 1958 entitled 'The Face of Youth' by Michael Kullman, Derek Allcorn and Clancy Sigal, 'Nihilism's Organizational Man', *Universities and Left Review*, 6 (1958), 51–65. Stuart Hall's article 'Absolute Beginnings' is also interesting in this context, *Universities and Left Review*, 7 (1959), 17–25. Later texts concerned with this issue produced by New Left and CCCS writers include Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (London, 1964); Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community'; Hall, *Resistance Through Rituals*; Peter Laurie, *The Teenage Revolution*: (London: 1965); Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake*; there are also several articles specifically on 1950s youth culture in Colin MacInnes' *England, Half English* (London, 1986).

20 Greta Duncan and Roy Wilkie, 'Glasgow Adolescents', *Universities and Left Review*, 5 (1958), p. 24.

21 See, for example, Derek Allcorn, 'The Unnoticed Generation', *Universities and Left Review*, 4, 1958, 54–58; Michael Kullman, 'The Anti-Culture Born of Despair', *Universities and Left Review*, 4 (1958), 51–54; and Clancy Sigal, 'Nihilism's Organization Man', *Universities and Left Review*, 4 (1958), 58–65. See also Nick Bentley, 'The Young Ones'.

22 Stuart Hall, 'Politics of Adolescence?', *Universities and Left Review*, 6 (1959), p. 2.

23 Kenneth Leech also supports this view. He writes: 'the Teddy Boy movement was not directly the product of economic poverty, but rather of developing affluence combined with boredom', Leech, *Youthquake*, p. 3.

24 Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 193.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

27 Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London and New York, 1988), p. 51. A similar approach is adopted in Michael Kullman's *Universities and Left Review* article of 1958, which stressed the cultural paucity of youth culture, regarding pop forms such as Rock and Roll as indicative of entertainment for the mis-educated (Kullman, 'The Anti-Culture Born of Despair'). Kullman records the preponderance of what he calls 'anti-culture' in popular youth cultures to be the result of the early segregation of British youth in education because of the eleven-plus examination. His definition of working-class youth subculture as 'anti-culture' indicates a particular construction of what 'culture' means based on older models of high and low culture.

28 Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London and New York, 1995), p. 31.

29 Some of the other novels of the period that include adolescent or youthful main characters are Kingsley Amis *Lucky Jim* [1954] (Harmondsworth, 1961); John Braine, *Room at the Top* [1957] (Harmondsworth, 1959); Doris Lessing, *In Pursuit of the English* (London, 1960); Lynne Reid Banks, *The L-Shaped Room* [1960] (London, 2004); Alan Sillitoe *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* [1959] (London, 1985); David Storey, *This Sporting Life* [1962] (Harmondsworth, 1960); Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam* [1954] (Edinburgh,

1996); and John Wain, *Hurry on Down* [1953] (Harmondsworth, 1960). It is also worth mentioning Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* [1958] (London, 1982) in this context.

30 Phil Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working-class Community'.

31 I discuss these two elements of MacInnes' approach to youth in Bentley, 'The Young Ones'.

32 MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, p. 47.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

34 Paul Rock and Stanley Cohen, 'The Teddy Boy', in Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky (eds), *The Age of Affluence 1951–1964* (Basingstoke, 1970), p. 314. See also Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 119–23.

35 This is also the case in the form of ethnographic interviews, where although there is an authentic transcribing of the voice of the subject, this is framed and interpreted by the 'theoretically-informed' ethnographer.

36 Mike Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture: Sex and Drugs and Rock'n'roll* (London, 1980), p. 75.

37 Hebdige reads the 1950s jazz subculture as an 'unprecedented convergence of black and white', Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 47.

38 MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, pp. 68–9.

39 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics: A Contemporary View of Criticism*, 16:1 (1986), 22–7.

40 See, for example, Jefferson, 'Cultural Responses', p. 82; p. 84; and Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture*, p. 72.

41 This view obscures the very real technical ability of rock'n'roll musicians such as Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley's guitarist Scotty Moore.

42 Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture*, p. 77

43 Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils*, p. 155.

44 Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, [1958] (London, 1994); and 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner', in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

45 Both of Sillitoe's texts were adapted in films in the late 1950s as part of the British New Wave, and arguably created more of a popular impact in the film adaptations, especially in the roles taken by Albert Finney and Tom Courtney in the novel and short story respectively. See *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, dir. Karel Reisz (1960); and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, dir. Tony Richardson (1962).

46 Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, p. 16.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

48 Lynne Segal 'Look Back in Anger: Men in the Fifties', in *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London, 1990), pp. 1–25

49 Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, p. 66.

50 Jefferson, 'Cultural Responses', pp. 83–4. The italics are in the original.

51 Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 50.

52 As with the teenager in MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners*; and other texts that include young observers of society such as the narrator in Doris Lessing's *In Pursuit of the English*; and Jane Graham in Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room*.

53 Keith Waterhouse, *Billy Liar* [1959] (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 44.

54 Hoggart tends to hyphenate 'milk-bar', whilst Waterhouse uses 'milkbar'. This small difference in punctuation reveals, I would suggest, a greater familiarity with them in Waterhouse's case. For Hoggart, they remain essentially alien cultural spaces. I have used both versions in the text to keep faith with the context in which each writer uses the term.

55 Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (London, 1960). This reading of Spark's

work draws on an earlier published analysis of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* in my book *Radical Fictions*, pp. 188–91.

56 I am referring here to the idea of gender as performative in Judith Butler's writing. See, for example, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

57 Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, p. 76.

58 Segal, 'Look Back in Anger'; Ferrebe, *Masculinity in Male-Authorred Fiction*; and Susan Brook *Literature and Cultural Criticism in the 1950s: The Feeling Male Body* (Basingstoke, 2007).

59 Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, p.76.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–3.

61 Tony Jefferson has highlighted the way in which the Teddy boys were particularly sensitive to insults about their appearance and practices, which he argues helps to explain their tendency towards violence: 'Fights which ensued when individuals insulted Teds are explicable in terms of a defence of the self and the cultural extension of the self symbolised in their dress and general appearance', Jefferson, 'Cultural Responses', p. 82.

62 Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, p. 76.

63 Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, pp. 246–50.

64 Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, p. 60.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 60

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