

Slouching towards bethlehem



**ASSIGN
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In her *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* essay, Joan Didion vividly constructs her view on the hippie movement in San Francisco through her anecdotal experience in 1967. Her belief captures a strong disliking of this social movement, as her experience indicates she did not condone the society which was created during the hippie movement. Others, such as John Stuart Mill, believe that social movements, such as the hippie one, are the culmination of individuality of others and are necessary for the progression of society. Both of their perspectives exhibit some truth, which can formulate into a new belief. All social movements should be respected in the terms of their times and should not be condoned, but not all social movements can be deemed as progress for society.

Didion begins the essay by painting a distraught picture of America and eventually moving on to discuss the “social hemorrhaging” in San Francisco, referring to the hippie movement. She makes some friends along the way, as she tells her story of meeting people who lived off being high, dropping out and leaving every bit of conservatism out the door. In her conversation with two runaway teenagers, she creates a sense of disappointment and sadness towards the teenagers through verbal montage. She asks what they were planning to do next in which the boy replies “I always kinda dug metal shop, welding... Anyway you can’t pre-plan” (92). The girl says that she could baby-sit. She then asks the teenagers what they saw their future as when they were kids; This abruptly changes the whole conversation to the reader, as the girl replies she wanted to be a veterinarian. From this, without even stating her exact opinion, Didion deduces the consequences of the hippie

movement on being detrimental to the youth and what they could be without the hippie influence.

Evidently, the move from the conservative to liberal stature seemed as downgrade to society to Didion. However, Mill explains “ There is always need of persons...to discover new truths...to commence new practices...This cannot well be gainsaid by anybody who does not believe that the world has already attained perfection...” (53). For Mill, in order for society to progress, these social movements must happen as people need to form and change. It also keeps “ the life in those which already existed” (53) as it keeps the intellect of mankind alive. Mill’s Statement is contradicted by the descriptions of Didion as she tells the story of Deadeye and Gerry who seem to live a life of clueless ambition. Their marriage seems almost like a comical decision done by children when explained by Didion. This childish appeal seems to be apparent in the adult lives of hippies, which consequently affects the children as they have to live in the environment of drugs and unregulated liberty. Five year olds are going to “ high-Kindergarten” as it is the norm for the society at the time. It is very logical from a conservative point of view that societal values to the hippies is essentially thrown out.

Mill, however, does not find this as a bad thing to happen to society. He writes “...it is important to give the freest scope possible to uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs” (56). In order for society to advance, we must be willing to collectively let go of the notion of what we believe to be as traditional. By Didion condemning the hippie movement, she is asserting that the values she holds are the only values to be used. This is not a

progressing view, as it takes away value from the people who lived in the hippie movement. Nonetheless, one can see that the movement did not place any societal progress in terms of people, education, government, or even the prospering of youth.

In short terms, it was a time of reckless being and going against the conformity by experimenting with a free lifestyle of drugs, drinking and sex. This was not the best societal values and it did not leave a lasting positive impact on the values of society. Rather, it brought a little sense of vitality in the idea of not conforming. Mill believes that a new form of vital energy could allow for “ an outlet of energy” (58) in which society can create a strengthening belief and will in what they really want instead of always following “ outward conformity” (58). But as seen through the anecdotes of Didion, the hippies were not trying to make a bold statement on conformity, nor were they trying to rule. They just wanted to live their lives in the peaceful matter, which ultimately did not help the progression of society. Thus, the hippie movement enabled both adult and youth to express themselves in a new liberal matter which provided for a shift to liberalism in the 1960s that should be acknowledged and not condoned. However, it did not provide any everlasting effect on the well being of society, so it can be seen that not every social movement established a great progression of society.