

Gender and The Teddy Boy

– The emergence of a Subculture.

In this lecture I would like to look at the subculture of the Teddy Boys.

Henrietta Moore stated that “bodies are a site where subjects are morphologically and socially constructed, they mark this intersection of the social and the symbolic; each subject’s relationship between his or her body is both material and imaginary.”

(Moore.1999). We can portray and change how we require, wish, or feel we need to be seen and viewed. We are not restricted and are free to be who we want to be. Our outward image can be different to us and give a different message of ourselves to others. There are not boundaries or restrictions.

“Sex, gender and sexuality are the product of a set of interactions with material and symbolic conditions mediated through language and representation.”

(Moore.1999). The Teddy boys had a confusing image by the traditional thoughts and beliefs of a 1950’s Britain. Britain had only recently ended rationing, after

the ending of World War II, women were expected to be at home, taking care of not just the home and children, but also their husbands. Men, seen as the “breadwinners”, traditionally had their hair kept short and wore clothes of muted colours, the Teddy boys however completely reversed the traditional views of what it was to look “masculine.” Strangely however, most of the British public in the 1950’s, viewed them as aggressive, violent individuals, that installed terror into many. They were blamed and accused of many fights, injuries, deaths and finally their behaviour led to riots, caused by the Teddy boys themselves. The media highlighted many, many incidents which only fuelled the already scared and frightened British public.

“We live our lives, that is as a complex relation between a radical materialism and a radical social construction.” (Moore.1999). The “working-class” Teddy Boys had the good fortune of the availability of plentiful, well-paid employment, leaving them with “spare” money to spend on material items. For one of the first times in their history the “working class” had time for leisure.

We tend to refer to Teddy Boys as the first subculture that appeared in Britain. Firstly, let us look at what we understand as a subculture. The term subculture refers to a specific group of people connected by some sort of special and different values, norms, behaviour, and lifestyle differing from the “common” people, (Smolik .2010). We often see that a certain group of people with similar problems will gather and form a group or gang.

The Teddy Boys first became to appear in Britain in 1954, although a subculture had appeared a couple of years earlier, with the first written article appearing in 1953 in the Daily Express newspaper. (Ticha.2014). The Teddy Boys, their name was abbreviated to Teds, appeared in areas of Eastern and Southern London. The Teddy Boys were predominantly from very much working-class backgrounds. British society was not ready for such a subculture and viewed the Teddy Boys as intimidating. Becoming part of a Teddy boy “gang,” gave the individuals a sense of belonging and empowered them in a society, where they were seen as “lower” We should take note from this date, rationing in Britain had only recently ended in Britain, after the second world war ended in 1945 and wages were much higher than they had ever been. The youth that were to become Teddy Boys were born in the war

years, when times were tough in so many ways. The youth now had disposable income for the first time, not only from their wages but also from black market economies. (Ross.2019).

Being Britain's, first post war subculture, these Teddy boys showed their views through defiance, this materialised as anger and the need and desire to separate themselves from what was thought as the “norm” in society. The rate of criminal activity amongst adolescents doubled in the second half of the 1950s. (Cross.1998). A link can be drawn between increased violence and the “slum clearance,” which took place in the 1950s. Teddy boys saw their body as a “canvas”, aesthetically and as a weapon. (Cross.1998).

Teddy boys were involved in much gang violence and used such weapons as flick knives, razors and even bicycle chains. There were many high-profile cases, where Teddy boys were involved or indeed to have started. Amongst these cases were, the Derek Bentley case, the John Beckley murder and the first race riots, which took place in Notting Hill. Sadly, as now, immigrants were seen as a threat to the Teddy boys. They were afraid to lose their jobs to immigrants and this tension led to the Notting Hill riots. The Teddy

boys grew to become a much-feared phenomenon in the 1950s.

The Teddy boys took their name and look from the Edwardian period, to be precise King Edward VII. By going back to Edwardian values and appearance, their representation was a clear example of masculinity and national identity. (Ross.2019). The suits that were once made for the young middle class and upper class Edwardian men, were now being worn by the young working class and not just for “Sunday Best.” I must note that there were also females in this subculture, and they were referred to as Teddy Girls. Society and the press did not seem to view them in the same way, as they viewed the Teddy Boys, possibly because they appeared in much lower numbers, even though their behaviour, fitted the “brand” that the Teddy Boys had created. (Ross.2019). As with the Teddy Boys, the Teddy Girls came from the same social backgrounds.

Hebdige says that youths' styles represent “semiotic guerrilla warfare.” (Hebdige.1979). He goes on to add that “each style should be understood in relation to the social class experience of its creators, the culture of their parents, the black immigration presence and the mass media.” (Hebdige.1979). The widest and most varied category of material culture is our

clothing. As with the Teddy Boys, the style they dressed in, would become a uniform.

The way that the Teddy Boys dressed was thought to be a way of attempting to establish the first male working-class fashion. (Ferris-Lord.2012). Working class males had before always had clothes for “working in” during the week and their ,“Sunday Best.” The term “Sunday Best” related to the one or two suits they owned, which were only worn for special occasions, church, weddings, funerals etc and never just for everyday use.

The Teddy Boys, with their choice of clothes were able to create a cross over between the two. “Finding the balance between functionality (working clothes) and opulence (finest clothes. (Cross.1998). Interestingly Teddy Boys would often wear their fathers' jackets, which they had had taken in, to suit their fresh style. (Ferris-Lord 2012).

We can now take a more detailed look at what the “uniform” of the Teddy Boys was. They could be easily recognised by their choice of trousers. The early Teddy boys would wear Peg trousers, these trousers were cut full at the waist and thigh area and then tapered to a cuff at the ankle. Soon they would be seen and

recognised by their “Drainpipe” trouser. Again, as with their jackets, these trousers would often have once belonged to their fathers and as before they would have been taken in and altered. These trousers had wide 16-inch bottoms on them. Both the Peg and Drainpipe trouser were worn in a way that showed their socks. At the start their socks were usually white, however later in the 50’s their socks were changed to ones that were far brighter and vibrant. (Ferris-Lord.2012). Individual gangs could be recognised by the colour of their socks. (Ferris-Lord.2012).

Interestingly the Teddy Boys that re-emerged in the 1970’s, would not only have colourful socks, but they had also opted for brightly coloured suits and even brightly coloured shoes.

When it came to footwear the Teddy Boys would wear an array of styles, Brothel creepers, Chukka boot, Chelsea boot and a slip-on style were amongst the most familiar.

At the start the Teddy Boys would wear a “normal” everyday gentleman's tie, again the type and colours that their fathers and grandfathers had worn before them, as part of their “Sunday Best” attire, however as time passed, one of the necessities to complement their look was a much narrower tie, which was known

as a Bootlace tie or a Maverick tie. (Smolik.2010). At the same time as the ties changed, the Teddy boys' jackets also had velvet, satin and moleskin collars added to their jackets. The Jackets also become much more vibrant in colour, as opposed to the more muted browns, blacks, greys of the first jackets they would wear. As the style of their dress changed, many of the Teddy boys left. They felt “the suits were getting too many accessories (...) It was getting commercial looking.” (Ferris-Lloyd.2012). They felt that the bootlace ties had nothing to do with the original Edwardian look, which they had opted for and that their whole image and style was beginning to look cheap. The original idea and beliefs of the Edwardian man's look was thought to portray class, power, money also at the same time, some of the Britain's most well-known and thought of suit makers, including Goodall and Sacks, stopped making Teddy boy suits.

Finally, the Teddy boys' hairstyles, they favoured the flamboyant “quiffed” style. “Their masculinity was questioned despite their initial objective to emphasize their masculinity.” (Cross.1998). Remembering that less than 10 years previously World War two was still taking place and the short soldier haircut was seen as the “normal” masculinity. (Cross.1998).

Music would play a large part in the life of a Teddy boy. They believed that they could escape the difficulties of being working class, and rattle the metaphorical shackle, with the means of music. The music often had the opposite and due to their devotion to the music, they would condemn themselves to a life of unskilled jobs. (Hebdige.1991).

By the 1960's the Teddy Boys (Teds) and their activities had faded away, only a small number of Teds remained loyal and devoted to the Teddy boy style and culture. These Teds known as the 'Originals', tried to preserve

the legacy of the subculture, mainly in smaller cities, towns and in some of the working-class suburbs of the larger cities. (Ferris-Lord.2012).

The Teddy boys did not make a re-emergence until the 1970s, their beliefs and image had altered, and they no longer were seen as the threat, that they had been in the 1950's.

Finally, the Teddy Boys are responsible for inspiring the generations that came after them. The Teddy Boys paved the way for the Mods, Rockers, Punks, New Romantics etc, that were to come after them. Life for a Teddy Boy today is far, far removed from the bleak days, that their predecessors had to endure in early 1950's Britain. The modern-day British Teddy boy still have the community and working class at the heart of them, the need to care for and bring together for all their good and support.

Ferris, R. and Lord, J. (2012) *Teddy Boys: A Concise History*. Milo Books Ltd.

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Ross, S.A. (2019) *Youth Culture and the Post-War British Novel: From Teddy Boys to Trainspotting*. Bloomsbury Academic. Available at: <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:20217/> (Accessed: 20 October 2023).