

Countercultural Verses: A Postmodern Reading of Hippie-Era Poetry in 1960s America

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Abstract— This paper presents a segment of the M.A. thesis titled *Countercultural Narratives: A Postmodern Study of American Poetry in the 1960s*. It examines the rise of postmodernism and its manifestation in the poetry of the 1960s. How did postmodern traits reflect the social and spiritual changes of the time? What were the conditions that pushed writers to experiment with literature by using innovative methods of expressions, such as deconstruction, intertextuality, and little narratives? To address these questions, this study will analyze Robert Duncan's *Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow* (1960), Philip Whalen's *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz* (1960), and James Dickey's *The Sheep Child* (1966). The paper focuses on the main postmodern concepts, such as Derrida's deconstruction, Lyotard's little narratives, and Kristeva's intertextuality. These techniques, along with the unconventional subject matters, will be studied in relation to the decade's major countercultural movement, the Hippie Movement, and its ideals. By filling this gap in existing research, this study aims to contribute to theory of postmodernism.

Index Terms— Countercultural Movement, Hippie, Little Narratives, Postmodernism, 1960s Poetry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism brought in many innovative concepts like deconstruction, intertextuality, and little narratives, which are now widely used in contemporary literature and criticism. However, do we truly understand their origins? How did poets like Robert Duncan, Philip Whalen, and James Dickey suddenly begin using bold techniques to challenge traditional writing and thinking? Despite the widespread adoption of these concepts, little is known about their precise beginnings. What encouraged writers to break from modernism? How did the social atmosphere affect their experimentation with form and subject matter? To shed light on this, the study will discuss a leading 1960s countercultural movement, namely the Hippie Movement, and link it to the postmodern literary strategies, such as deconstruction, little narratives, and intertextuality, in the poetry of Duncan, Whalen, and Dickey. Ultimately, in exploring the origins of these concepts, the research demonstrates how these postmodern techniques were inspired by the countercultural ideas of the 1960s.

A. Historical Background

The development of postmodern poetry grew out of the cultural changes that happened in America during the 1960s (Elaati, 2016). During this era, there was a series of radical revolutions against the traditional norms and social pressures imposed by the modernist period. The "Sixties," was a very unstable decade for America, as the country faced many internal challenges. People protested against the conservative and materialistic society of the 1950s (Sacquety, 2008). The 1950s was a time of conformity, traditional family values, and economic prosperity for many, but it also suppressed social and political protests. The economic boom after WWII brought prosperity to the United States, which created a culture of consumerism and competition with suburban expansion, and widespread ownership of cars, televisions, and houses. Along with materialism, the 1950s promoted a socially conservative vision of family and gender roles by emphasizing traditional marriage and strict gender norms. These were advocated for by religion. Historian Stephen J. Whitfield (2008), in describing the sixties, quote that "the political, social, and sexual repression was simply too great for humans in an ostensibly open society to bear" (Whitfield, 2008, pp. 11 – 12). This repression, in addition to a desire for change, paved the way for the countercultural Hippie movement of the 1960s.

B. Countercultural Narratives and Postmodern Literature

The restrictive social norms greatly overwhelmed the Americans and deepened the sense of discomfort for the nation. People longed for a space to channel their frustration and advocate for change. As an outcome, the 1960s countercultural Hippie movement emerged, where activists, artists, and ordinary citizens came together to challenge the status quo and push for social change on multiple fronts. This movement, through its countercultural messages, offered alternative lifestyles to the mainstream America and questioned institutional authority (Richardson, 2012). The major movement that is classified as countercultural is the Hippie Movement, which promoted freedom, diversity, and equality. From this movement, a new literary form was developed in America, postmodern poetry, which is recognized for deconstruction, little narratives, and intertextuality. These methods helped to question authority, reject established norms,

and favor plurality. Hence, this paper claims that the postmodern traits (techniques and themes) are the manifestations of the countercultural ideals of Hippie movement, which makes postmodern poems countercultural narratives.

These narratives are known for their unstructured writing style and unconventional subject matters like freedom, diversity, equality, spirituality, and sexuality (Szeman & O'Brien, 2017). Scholar Gerhard Hoffman, his book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction* (2005) state that due to the influence of deconstruction, "the totalizing features of narrative—character, plot, theme—have been deconstructed" (Hoffman, 2005, p. 19). This means that in postmodern literature, the traditional elements of storytelling, such as character, plot, and theme, are broken down intentionally. Instead of clear, structured narratives with well-defined characters and a logical sequence of events, postmodern poetry features fragmented stories and shifting perspectives. Themes are ambiguous or open-ended rather than conveying a single, clear message. This approach challenges the traditional idea that stories must have a fixed meaning. Instead, it encourages readers to interpret texts in multiple ways.

C. Countercultural Movement (Hippie)

The main countercultural movement of the 1960s was the Hippie Movement. It was led by psychologist Timothy Leary and supported by writers from the Beat Generation, Black Mountain Poets, and other independent intellectuals (Rajput, 2017). It was a spiritual and social movement that attracted many young college students, who did not want to follow the materialistic and restrictive social norms of the 1950s. Hippies distanced themselves from the mainstream American society by engaging in personal freedom, activism, communal living, meditation, using drug, and sex. They were inspired by Eastern philosophies like Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism (Fischer, 2006; Lutfi, 2018). Through meditation, they created an internal reality, not as an illusion but as a mystical experience, which allowed them to escape the limits of Western Christian culture (Ataria, 2014). The Hippie movement and their fascination with Eastern philosophy had a great impact on the postmodern poetry of the 1960s. It shaped postmodern themes and techniques (Xu, 2023). American poets, such as Robert Duncan, Philip Whalen, and James Dickey used methods like deconstruction, intertextuality, and little narratives to advocate for Eastern ideologies and alternative ways of living. Hippies also supported bisexuality and queerness as part of their beliefs in personal and sexual liberation.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Postmodern Criticism

This study uses a postmodern approach to analyze the selected poems. Postmodernism is chosen to address a gap in current scholarship: finding the origins of its main concepts and linking them to the countercultural movement of the 1960s, Hippie. While postmodern literature appeared in America with the rise of the Hippie movement in the early 1960s, postmodern criticism began during the mid-sixties in France. This period

saw the development of critical approaches that challenged traditional modes of interpretation and questioned conventional ideas and meaning in literature. Postmodern critics began to focus on the plurality of interpretation, the instability of texts, and the rejection of universal truths. Scholars Taylor and Winquist, in their book, *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (2002), state that Postmodern critique, which occurred in the 1960s, was heavily influenced by the works of "the French Poststructuralists (Derrida, Barthes, and Lyotard)." These theorists "practiced postmodern critique, incorporated and developed the major strategies" (Taylor & Winquist, 2002, p.302), such as deconstruction, little narratives, and intertextuality. This indicates that poststructuralists provided tools for analyzing postmodern texts, which is why they are referred to as postmodern critics.

Postmodern criticism mainly emphasize pluralism in interpretation, which encourages a variety of perspectives in reading literature (Bennett & Royle, 2004). From the 1960s onwards, postmodern theorists like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes pushed back against the conventional idea of the author as the main figure in determining a text's meaning. They argued that focusing only on the author's intention limits the possibilities of interpretation. In his influential essay *The Death of the Author* (1968), Barthes suggests that the concept of the "author" should be set aside altogether. He explained that once a text is created, it belongs not to the author but to the readers, who bring their own interpretations to it. Treating the author as the key figure in literature is a form of control as it imposes limits on how a text is understood. Therefore, Barthes seeks to transform reading into a productive practice in which the reader is liberated from the process of decoding the author's intended message. For him, meaning is discovered through the reader's active engagement with the text. Each reader brings their own unique set of memories, experiences, and cultural references, which influence how they interpret the text. For this reason, Barthes concludes that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. (Montgomery, 2007). This approach frees the text from the author's control and allows for a more fluid understanding of the text, where meaning is not fixed but rather evolves as the reading process continues.

Likewise, this study, with its postmodern approach, adopts Barthe's idea and metaphorically "kill" the author. This opens the selected texts to multiple interpretations based on the knowledge that have been gathered about each poem. The reading process depends on what Christopher Butler (2002) calls "the free play of the imagination" (Butler, 2002, p. 24), where the reader has the freedom to engage with the text without being constrained by the author's intentions. Meaning becomes the property of the interpreter, who can freely explore, reinterpret, and "play" with the text. This approach allows the reader to challenge traditional interpretations and uncover new, unexpected meanings.

B. Deconstruction

The concept of deconstruction is introduced by Jacques Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology* (1967). In this text, Derrida's goal is to challenge the traditional Western binary thinking and fixed meaning (Derrida, 1967). According to him, deconstruction is a method of writing that goes against modernist structuralism, which focused on binary oppositions

that were ranked in hierarchical orders (Norris, 2002). Common modern binaries include: good/evil, male/female, and human/animal. These pairs were usually viewed as unequal, with one side considered better than the other (for example, humans over animals, or men over women). Derrida critiques this mode of thinking by arguing that it limits understanding because it systematically supports the dominant term and marginalizes the other (Norris, 2002).

Deconstructive method, however, dismantles the text by presenting contradictory elements. While a text may seem to support one side of a binary opposition, it simultaneously contains signs that it also favors the opposite side, the one usually considered as less important (Sikirivwa, 2020). In this way, deconstruction opens the texts to multiple viewpoints and interpretations, as it treats both sides equally. This method can appear at different levels in a text. For example, it can happen between two opposite phrases that contradict each other, or between two opposite sentences, speakers, narrative voices, themes, or images. It works in a way that is similar to a paradox (Norris, 2002). According to Christopher Norris (2002), postmodern American writers, during a time of criticism and discontent, saw Derrida's method as "a liberating force" (Norris, 2002, p. 21) that freed them from restricted ways of thinking. This is why Derrida's deconstruction often leaves the readers in the state of undecidability, where the writing creates situations that make it impossible to choose between two competing interpretations (Childs & Fowler, 2006), and thus, accepting contradictory viewpoints to exist at the same time.

C. Little Narratives

Little narrative is a concept that is discussed in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) by scholar Jean-François Lyotard in relation to grand narratives or "meta-narratives." Lyotard describes grand narratives as expansive ideologies traditionally considered as the right answer for most aspects of human existence. These narratives are tied to religious beliefs as well as social and political systems that advocate for "one universal truth." They give people a sense of purpose and moral direction, which helps them understand what is right or wrong. An example of grand narrative includes religious doctrines, such as Christianity, which explain the creation of the world, the purpose of life, and what happens after death (Taylor & Winquist, 2002). Grand narratives sometimes become tools of power, as those in charge can use them to control others by saying their version of the story is the only correct one. They usually privilege one side of the binary over the other.

With the rise of postmodernism, little narratives that are smaller and localized ideas appeared. These narratives challenged or resisted the totalizing claims of grand narratives. Little narratives are personal, subjective, community-based ideas. They reflect individual experiences, perspectives, and identities (Taylor & Winquist, 2002). According to Mason (2017), little narratives was a counter-response to the dominance of modernism's grand narrative of capitalism. This is because, capitalism advocated for economic progress and social advancement. This narrative suggests that competition leads to continuous innovation and better living standards, and thus, it was celebrated during modernism. However, as little narratives gained attention, they exposed the darker side of

capitalism, such as how the constant pursuit of material success drained people's energy and reduced their ability to think critically. Little narratives also empowered marginalized groups by valuing their unique experiences and showing that their stories matter, too (Taylor & Winquist, 2002).

D. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a postmodern concept, introduced by Julia Kristeva in her essay, *Word, Dialogue and Novel*, published in 1966. In this work, Kristeva builds on the notion that each text is in communication with other texts, voices, and cultural elements. She coins the term *intertextualité*, stating that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Guadu, 2023, pp.108–111). This perspective challenges the traditional view of texts as isolated, self-contained entities. Instead, it positions them as sites of interaction between multiple texts. Meanings are not created in isolation but through a network of relationships. To put it simply, Intertextuality is a postmodern reinterpretation for what was once known as allusion. Traditionally, allusions were mainly thematic references, used to draw parallel between two texts (Montgomery, 2007). Intertextuality, however, radicalizes this concept by carrying political messages and implicit criticism.

The excessive use of intertextuality in postmodern literature raises important questions about originality and authorship. Does it always encourage creative and meaningful engagement with other texts, or can it sometimes lead to a lack of originality or even plagiarism? When applied thoughtfully, intertextuality allows writers to build upon existing works, critique dominant narratives, and develop new interpretations. On the other hand, intertextuality can sometimes blur the line between influence and imitation. If a work relies too heavily on another without adding new insights or transforming the material, it may be seen as lacking originality or even plagiaristic (Bennett & Royle, 2004). Intertextuality challenges the author's power to determine the meaning of the text since there is no originality.

III. ROBERT DUNCAN'S OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW (1960)

One of the leading American poets of the 1960s was Robert Duncan, a poet of vision and intertextuality. During the 1960s, he solidified his reputation as a major spiritual poet, a cultural hero, who began a new era of poetic expression (Axelrod, et al. 2012). Duncan was a homosexual activist associated with the Hippie movement (Katz, 2018). His works mainly revolve around the mystical world, homosexual identities, imagination, being one with nature, and broader philosophical inquiries about truth and existence. *Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow* (1960), is Duncan's most famous poem, which was part of his poetry collection *The Opening of the Field* (1960). The publication of this anthology marked a turning point in his career, which established him as a key poet of the 20th century (Bertholf, 1999). It connected him to open-form poetry, the countercultural movements of the 1960s, and postmodernist techniques. *Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow* (1960) is a visionary and meditative poem that explores themes of transcendence, the nature of existence, and identity. Duncan's poem, through the use of postmodern techniques creates a

layered interpretation of the meadow. He invites readers to consider the meadow as a space of renewal and enlightenment.

A. “Mine” and “Not Mine”: Duncan’s Deconstructed Meadow

Duncan’s poem begins with a mysterious title, “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow.” The word “Often” means it happens many times. “I am permitted” means someone or something must allow the speaker to go back—it is not entirely in their control. “Return” indicates that the speaker has been there before. “A meadow” is a peaceful, grassy field, which is quiet and natural. Altogether, the title means that the speaker is sometimes allowed to go back to a calm, special place, but only when something or someone lets them. The title does not say who gives permission or what the meadow really is, which makes it ambiguous. In elaborating on the nature of the meadow, Duncan begins the poem with:

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought.

(Duncan 1 – 4)

Although these lines appear to explain what the meadow is, they ultimately leave the reader in a state of undecidability, as the poem never clarifies what the meadow really is. This uncertainty is because the meadow is described in contradictory ways. Initially, Duncan presents the meadow as a physical location, such as this world. He describes the meadow, stating, “as if it were a scene made-up by the mind.../but is a made place.” The phrase “as if” implies that, while it may appear imaginary, it is not a mental construct. It “is a made place” reinforces it as a tangible, physical location. Additionally, the speaker also describes it as “that is not mine,” which means it does not belong to him, but rather originates from a greater force. This idea is immediately deconstructed when he states, “that is mine, it is so near to the heart,” which introduces a sense of personal ownership and emotional closeness.

The contradiction between “not mine” and “mine” embodies Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction; a method developed in *Of Grammatology* (1967). According to Derrida, deconstruction refers to the internal contradictions within a text. It proposes that meaning is never stable, which challenges the idea of a singular, authoritative interpretation (Mendie & Udofia, 2020). This internal contradiction, as discussed in Conceptual Framework section, manifests differently across poems. In Duncan’s poem, the contradiction occurs between two directly opposing statements, “that is not mine... / that is mine,” which leaves the nature of the meadow undecidable and open it to multiple readings. The deconstructive play continues in the following line, “an eternal pasture folded in all thought,” where the speaker changes the meadow from a physical space to a mental or spiritual one. This line challenges the earlier suggestion that the meadow is a real location, implied by “as if” it were imaginary. By placing the meadow within “all thought,” Duncan relocates it to a mystical realm and simultaneously deconstructs the notion that it belongs solely to his imagination, which means it emerges from the collective consciousness.

These opposite elements encourage readers to accept multiple interpretations since both meanings are supported by the text (Mendie & Udofia, 2020). In this way, Duncan’s layered descriptions resist a single interpretation and instead reveal the meadow as both personal and universal, external and internal, real and imagined. Hence, the use of deconstruction becomes a countercultural tool to promote flexible ways of thinking and openness to diverse perspectives.

This idea aligns with Zen’s teachings of *impermanence* and *non-attachment*, which became popularized by Hippie philosophers like Alan Watts. Many Hippies, including Duncan, were inspired by Watts’s ideas (Mazuchova, 2022). *Impermanence* refers to the idea that everything is always changing and nothing lasts forever. Because all things are temporary, people are encouraged to let go of attachments, the practice of not clinging to people, objects, thoughts, or desires, to avoid suffering when those things inevitably change or disappear (Lomas, et al, 2017). Similarly, the shifting nature of the meadow in Duncan’s poem is connected to Zen’s rejection of fixed perceptions. Zen teaches that reality is constantly changing like the nature of thoughts. Each moment demands renewed understanding, thus, attaching to fixed mentality is discouraged. This is reflected in the way Duncan constructs and deconstructs the meadow in his work. Therefore, readers must not cling to one interpretation, as doing so leads to inevitable frustration.

B. Reincarnating Texts: Intertextual Journeys Between Plato’s Cave and the Hippie’s Meadow

In this section, the speaker describes his experience going through the meadow, stating:

so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am.
(Duncan 5 – 8)

If Robert Duncan’s meadow is interpreted as the physical world we inhabit, then these lines can be read as a vision of reincarnation—the soul’s journey from death to a higher, immaterial realm, then its return into this world (Atkinson, 2010). Duncan describes the entrance to the meadow, writing, “so that there is a hall therein/ that is a made place, created by light.” This image showcases the moment of death, when the soul departs from the body, passes through an illuminated space, and undergoes purification, which is symbolized by the “light.” Duncan continues, “Wherefrom fall all architectures I am,” which suggests that in this transition, the soul sheds all the things that once defined its previous identity—its former body, personality, feelings, memories, and social statuses. In this process, the soul loses its past experiences and is reborn in a new form, cleansed and pure. This step-by-step description constructs a vision of reincarnation. This interpretation is supported by the title of the poem, “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” which means that the speaker is granted permission by a higher force to return to the physical world, perhaps repeatedly through the cycle of rebirth.

This idea is an implicit reference to Eastern philosophies' understanding of life as a continuous, cyclical process rather than a linear one with a clear beginning and end. It exemplifies Julia Kristeva's intertextuality as discussed by a writer and academic, Graham Allen (2000). Allen explains that when writers create stories, they do not just choose words from the dictionary. They also choose ideas and tools from other stories that came before. This means their style of writing echoes ideas they have read in other books. Similarly, Duncan was fascinated by Eastern ideologies due to his engagement with the Hippie movement, which had a lasting impact on his belief system and writing style (Katz, 2018). In many Eastern traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, life is viewed through the lens of *reincarnation*, which refers to the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that applies not only to individual souls but also to *Brahman*, the universe as a whole (Sarao, 2017). This idea explains that the soul does not appear just once, it is reborn again and again, going through a cycle of reincarnation. With each rebirth, it forgets its past experiences and begins a new life (Atkinson, 2010). Hence, if the meadow represents this tangible world, these lines depict the speaker's process of reincarnation.

On the other hand, if the meadow represents the spiritual realm, what Buddhists and Hippies called *Nirvana*, then Duncan's description showcases a meditative journey toward enlightenment. The "hall.../ created by light" symbolizes self-purification, which is a necessary step the soul must take to reach this sacred space, the meadow. Hence, the meadow becomes a metaphor for higher consciousness—*Nirvana*—which is a state of deep inner peace, wisdom, and freedom from worldly illusions. These lines mean that within this spiritual realm there is a passageway, the hall of light, that one must go through. By doing so, the soul lets go of all "architectures," which is a metaphor for the false identities, perceptions, roles, material wealth, and societal restrictions and expectations imposed on the individual (Dewey, 2009). In this way, the soul gets purified and returns to the meadow—*Nirvana*.

Furthermore, these lines also mention that in this hall of light, "the shadows that are forms fall," which is a reference to "The Allegory of the Cave," in Plato's *The Republic* (385 BC). In this famous allegory, Plato uses a philosophical metaphor to illustrate the difference between the world of appearances and the world of reality. He describes a group of prisoners who have been chained inside a dark cave since birth. They are unable to move and can only see the blank wall in front of them. Behind them, there is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners, there is a walkway where objects are carried. The prisoners see only the shadows of these objects cast on the wall due to the fire, and since this is all they have ever known, they believe the shadows are the forms, real and physical objects. One prisoner eventually escapes his bindings and sees the sunlight, which represents true knowledge. The freed prisoner feels a duty to return to the cave to enlighten others, but they resist as they prefer the familiar illusions (Jensby, 2019).

This metaphor illustrates the difference between appearance and reality, ignorance and enlightenment, and the transformative power of spirituality in Duncan's poem. During the 1960s, the cave symbolizes the restrictive traditional belief systems and materialistic focus of previous generations, while the escaped prisoner stands for the Hippie generation that broke away from societal norms in search of enlightenment and

spiritual fulfillment. In Duncan's poem, the "shadows" that fall refer to illusions—false realities—like the shadows in Plato's cave. In the allegory, the prisoners mistake these shadows for the real world, just as people in 1960s America were misled by the illusions of material success and consumer culture. Americans were conditioned to equate success and self-worth with material wealth, social status, and outward appearances. In this way, individuals were trapped in a limited understanding of existence. By following the "light," people let go of these illusions and detach from the superficiality of their culture. This journey echoes Hippie's advocacy for renouncing worldly possessions in favor of spirituality and inner fulfillment.

Duncan's reference to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* exemplifies Kristeva's intertextuality as described by Fran Mason in *Historical Dictionary of Postmodernist Literature and Theater* (2017), where he states intertextuality is "an aesthetic recycling ... of old styles or texts" (Mason, 2017, p.11). Mason explains that *newness* comes from the creative way of reusing historical references in new contexts. In *The Republic* (385 BC), Plato argued that the real world is superior to illusions. He saw poetry and art as deceptive because they focused on imagination rather than truth. He encouraged people, like the cave prisoner, to escape the confines of imagination, symbolized by the shadows on the wall, and move towards physical reality, represented by the outside of the cave. However, Duncan recycles this philosophical framework to fit his own countercultural message. In Plato's allegory, the outside of the cave, which is the meadow in Duncan's poem, represents physical reality, while the shadows symbolize imagination. Duncan, however, flips this structure. The meadow, which is the outside of Plato's cave, symbolizes the mystical, imaginative realm, while the shadows what Plato viewed as illusions, now represent the physical, material world in Duncan's vision.

This change highlights Duncan's creativity in regards to the use of references. In his poem, the outside of Plato's cave is the spiritual world, while the shadows inside the cave is the physical world. Additionally, this means Duncan believes that these imagined or mystical experiences are actually the true reality. Duncan's idea directly challenges Plato's view and alters his argument by proposing that imagination and spirituality lead to a deeper understanding rather than deception. Furthermore, His reinterpretation of Plato's allegory to emphasize imagination and spirituality echoes the ideals of 1960s counterculture, which valued self-discovery, meditation, and mysticism over materialism. Hippies rejected industrialized society and consumer capitalism, viewing them as draining people's energy and distracting them from genuine human needs (Bridge & Storhoff, 2009). Likewise, Duncan suggests the necessity of shedding external constructs to live a more authentic, spiritual existence. Hence, his use of intertextuality becomes a countercultural tool to provide an alternative vision of reality that fits with the goals of the Hippie movement. This vision encourages individuals to abandon materialistic values and instead pursue an alternative lifestyle focused on spiritual connection and authenticity.

C. Duncan's Counter-Christian Perception

Duncan, then, through his little narrative, criticizes the traditional worldview upheld by Christians, as explored in the subsequent lines:

It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game
of ring a round of roses told.

(Duncan 14 – 18)

Here, Duncan compares life to “a dream,” which implies that it is an illusion and not serious (Faas, 1980). This directly goes against the Christian view, which sees life as real, meaningful, and something to be taken seriously. Duncan writes that life is “only a dream,” and describes the grass, which symbolizes people, as blowing east, “against the source of the sun... going down,” which means against west where the sun sets. In many spiritual traditions, the east symbolizes new beginnings and enlightenment, while the west represents endings and death. Hence, the direction of the grass blowing eastward showcases a desperate attempt of American people to cling tightly to this fleeting “dream” of life, while avoiding death. It proves that Western Christian society has been unable to accept death as a natural and necessary part of existence. That is why Duncan says, the “secret” of life, “we see in a children's game/ of ring a round of roses told.” The word “we” refers to Duncan and those who think like him—namely the countercultural Hippie group. The children's game is a reference to *Ring Around the Rosie*, which involves children holding hands, moving in a circle while singing, and then falling down—only to get up and repeat the cycle (Mullen, 2017). This game challenges readers' conventional understanding of life as a straight path with a beginning and an end. Instead, Duncan presents life as a cycle—where dying is just part of returning and beginning again.

Within 1960s America, this idea acts as a little narrative that challenges the grand narratives upheld by religion. In applying, Jean-François Lyotard's viewpoint, which is presented in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), the grand narrative refers to the widely accepted concept of life as linear and death as the end, which Christianity has historically established. However, Duncan, who was exposed to the Hippie and Zen ideologies, presents his subjective narrative, in which life is a continuous cycle, with no final ending (Branco, 2014). Through the image of the fearful “grass,” Duncan criticizes the traditional belief system of American society, which was largely shaped by Christianity that has historically instilled fear of death by marking it as the definitive end of people's existence. In contrast, Duncan provides a countercultural viewpoint of life as continuous. This aligns with Hippie movement's fearless embrace of death, viewing it as an essential part of existence. This interpretation is supported by Duncan's own words in his interview with Jack R. Cohn (1980), where he says, “I was raised in reincarnation” (Cohn, 1980, p.534).

To sum up, Robert Duncan's *Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow* reflects the values of the 1960s counterculture by

challenging traditional beliefs. He uses deconstruction to keep the meadow open to multiple meanings. This method encourages readers to accept change and different viewpoints, much like the Hippie idea of letting go of permanent, outdated perceptions. Through intertextual references to reincarnation and Plato's cave, Duncan shows his interest in spiritual over material truths. In the end, Duncan offers a personal, alternative view of life and death that questions dominant religious narratives.

IV. PHILIP WHALEN'S *METAPHYSICAL INSOMNIA JAZZ* (1960)

Philip Whalen was both a poet and a Zen priest. He was connected to the Hippie movement of the 1960s. Whalen regarded writing as an extension of his zazen practice, once saying, “my writing is an articulation of my practice and encouragement to you to enter into Buddhist practice” (Gábor 5). His poem *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz* (1960) showcases his unique style of mixing Zen philosophies with the mundane. The poem brings together cultural references and philosophical inquiries to create a meditation on perception and the movement of the mind. This poem appears in Whalen's important countercultural anthology, titled *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age* (1960), which is known for skipping between ideas, places, and moods without clear transitions. This is similar to the way thoughts arise in meditation. It matches with Whalen's assertion that a poem should be “a picture or graph of a mind moving” (Gábor, 2025, p.8). This means that poetry should be a mirror of the flow of consciousness, imitating the way the mind works, with all its changes, interruptions, and contradictions.

A. *Sarcasm or Sincerity: The Deconstructed Voice in Whalen's Poem*

The first element that captures attention in reading Whalen's poem is its title: *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz*. This title is composed of three distinct terms. The word “Metaphysical” points to philosophical questions about life and how we understand the world. “Insomnia” means a sleepless mind, filled with overthinking. “Jazz” refers to a style of American music known for improvisation and spontaneity. It is usually associated with urban culture. The term “Jazz” can also mean a very fast, lively talk, which refers to both a noisy place and a mind that will not quiet down. While the terms appear unrelated, together they hint at the poem's main concerns: late-night philosophical contemplation, inability to sleep, and too much noise. These themes begin to unfold immediately in the poem's opening lines:

Of
Course I could go to sleep right here
With all the lights on & the radio going
(April is behind the refrigerator).

(Whalen 1 – 4)

These opening lines reinforce the title and establish the mood of the poem by introducing the speaker's struggle with a restlessness mind. These lines begin with Derrida's deconstruction, as explained by Jack M. Balkin (1996). Balkin states that many deconstructions revolve around oppositional implications, which simply means that a statement often carries

with it an implied contrast, its opposite. For instance, Whalen's speaker claims he "could" sleep, yet everything suggests otherwise, there are bright lights, noises, and a surreal image of April behind the refrigerator. This deconstruction makes the phrase "Of/ Course" sounds flippant, as though the speaker is both frustrated and sarcastically complains about the environment that prevents him from resting. His immediate quibble about the presence of "all the lights" and the constant noise of the "radio," conveys the frustrations of living in a hyper-stimulated city. In the 1960s, the speaker's inability to rest in such environment speaks on the broader societal issue, the difficulty to attain inner peace amidst the distractions and pressures of urban life. Thus, deconstruction here is used as a tool to express dissent in a subtle, ironic, and critical manner.

This dissent aligns with the Hippie's countercultural rejection of modern urban life. They believed that true rest and inner peace are impossible in urban settings. Cities and towns with their constant lights, traffic, and consumer-driven culture, create a restless society where people are always "on," always working, accumulating wealth, and chasing after external success (Silos, 2003). This constant state of alertness, they believed, disconnected humans from nature, mindfulness, and peace. This interpretation is reinforced by Bridge and Storhoff (2009) who note that Whalen's writing is a "proof of his avant-garde status and as a way of distancing himself from identities available to mainstream Americans in the 1950s, as well as a means by which to access what he called the 'Real self'" (Bridge & Storhoff, 2009, pp.103 – 104). This indicates that Whalen, as a countercultural thinker, believed that mindfulness and inner peace are attainable only by stepping away from the dominant American values, particularly urbanization and consumerism. To him, silence and connection to earth restore balance to the human soul and calm their restless mind. As such, Whalen's exhausted speaker criticizes how the modern world strips individuals from major conditions for well-being: silence and space for physical, spiritual, and mental regeneration. In addition to that, Whalen also deconstructs the usual expectations of a speaker, in the following lines:

I met my fragile Kitty
In her greeny silken gown.
(Whalen 7 – 8)

Here, the speaker states that they have escaped urban life to reunite with their delicate, enchanting figure—Kitty—in nature. These lines reveal a surprising twist: the insomniac speaker is not a man, but in fact a cat. This is subtly expressed in the line "I met my fragile Kitty" which appears only once the speaker has entered the natural world. The reason why Whalen postponed the revelation of the speaker's identity is to show that our true identity, or as he calls the "Real Self" can only be discovered in nature (Bridge & Storhoff, 2009). In the earlier urban section of the poem, the speaker sounded like an overstimulated man annoyed by the city life. However, once surrounded by nature, the speaker's true self is deconstructed, it is revealed not as a frustrated, modern man, but as a relaxed, free creature. The choice of a cat as the speaker introduces a countercultural element which is rooted in Eastern philosophy (Gábor, 2025). In Zen Buddhism cats are often seen as ideal representation of Zen masters. Their calm nature is similar to

having Zen-like attitude toward life, which emphasizes mindfulness and detachment from worldly distractions (Hua, 2025). It explains why Zen masters and Hippie intellectuals like Alan Watts encouraged students to look to cats as examples of mindful living (Hua, 2025).

In fact, this reinterpretation of the speaker as a cat is a clear example of deconstruction as defined by Derrida. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida challenges the traditional Western emphasis on binary oppositions and fixed perspectives (Derrida, 1967). According to him, deconstruction is a method of writing through which the text constantly dismantles itself by presenting contradictory elements. This method stands against modernist structuralism, which emphasized binaries and hierarchies. These binary oppositions, such as good/evil, male/female, human/animal, were usually treated as hierarchies, where one side was seen as better than the other (for example, humans over animals, or men over women). Derrida argues that this way of thinking limits our understanding because it always supports the more dominant side.

Deconstruction helps countercultural writers to challenge these modernist "truths" by showing their contradictions (Sikirivwa, 2020). Similarly, Whalen's text initially seems to support one side of a binary, humans. But it also includes signs that it supports the other side which is often seen as less important, like the animal (cat) in this part of the poem. Here, deconstruction is used as a countercultural tool to elevate the typically disregarded side of the binary or worldview. This is because, modern poetry privileged the human speaker, as they were seen superior to animals. But with the rise of countercultural ideas and the influence of deconstruction, animals, and other overlooked voices, were given space to speak. In this way, Whalen gives voice to the animal side, challenging the modern belief that humans must always be the center.

In addition, by reimagining the speaker as a cat Whalen also deconstructs the opening lines, where the speaker seemed to be a human who complained about the lights and the noises. It disrupts the binary of not only human vs. animal, but also sarcasm vs. sincerity. Whalen's first lines, "Of/ Course I could go to sleep right here / With all the lights on & the radio going" (Whalen 1 – 3), initially sounded sarcastic, as a complaint about overstimulation. This supports one side of a binary: flippant vs. sincere. But once the speaker is hinted to be a cat, which is known for sleeping through chaos and embracing stillness, the statement flips. It now appears as an assertion, not ironic because it is genuinely possible for a cat to sleep in such places. In this way, Whalen makes it undecidable for the reader to fully grasp who the speaker is and leaves the interpretation open and fluid. This is exactly what Derrida calls undecidability: the text contains contradictory cues that prevent the reader from settling on one final interpretation. In doing so, Whalen displays his countercultural ideology that meaning, perception, and truth are context-dependent.

Additionally, Whalen highlights the beauty of natural spaces by describing Kitty as being "in her greeny silken gown," which paints an image of nature clothed in lush, shining greenery. It appears soft, flowing, and seductive. This image connects sensuality with the natural world. It implies that genuine beauty, emotional connection, and pleasure can only be found in the

serenity of nature. Despite the multiplicity of meanings, what remains clear is that Whalen depicts nature, in a lyrical, fairy-tale language, as intimate and desirable. This is in contrast to his description of cities and towns as described in the following section.

B. *Escaping the Binaries: Whalen's Little Narrative*

Far from the wicked city
Far from the virtuous town.
(Whalen 5 – 6)

In these lines, Whalen portrays both the city and the town as distant and irrelevant. This is in sharp contrast to how he depicted nature, as close and attractive. The speaker states that they are now far away from both corrupt cities and moral towns. Here, Whalen appears to challenge the dominant American values both urbanization and moral dualism. The traditional dichotomies, urban corruption vs. small-town virtue, are treated as equally unimportant, as if neither really matters. The speaker is now outside of these constructed moral binaries. In the 1960s, this alternative view against urban places and moral judgments becomes Whalen's little narrative as discussed in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) by Jean-François Lyotard. These narratives are explained in contrast to metanarratives, which historically divided the world into clear binary oppositions, such as good vs. evil or civilization vs. nature (Taylor & Winkler, 2002). These grand narratives provided a framework for social judgment, through which one group was perceived as superior and progressive while the other was deemed inferior and regressive.

Whalen's lines "Far from the wicked city / Far from the virtuous town" is a rejection of these grand narratives of moral categories: both the city (usually considered "bad") and the town (usually perceived as "good"). Instead, they are placed at a distance, as if Whalen is undermining the entire structure by placing both "the wicked" and "the virtuous" at equal remove. In fact, the speaker's rejection of these dualism reflects the Hippie's critique of modernist thinking, which created distinctions among people and valued one group over the other. Traditionally, small towns viewed themselves as morally better, while city residents prided themselves on being more advanced. Whalen's little narrative exposes this dualistic and hierarchal nature of modernist ideologies. He rejects both poles of the binary, which symbolize all mainstream American moral codes.

Whalen's repetition of the word "far," echoes the Hippie's method of "dropping out," which means removing oneself from all the mainstream societal structures (Silos, 2003), such as urban materialism and small-town conservatism. It is aligned with the Hippie movement's active rebellion against capitalist productivity and societal restrictions through their "dropping out" techniques, such as using psychedelic drugs, engaging in meditation, going back to nature, and communal living (Silos, 2003). In this way, Whalen advocates for a personal vision that encourages returning to nature by promoting it as the source of tranquility, beauty, and spiritual connection, an outlook which aligns with Eastern philosophies. Nonetheless, for Whalen, this implicit reference is not enough; he goes further by explicitly alluding to a well-known Zen philosophy, as mentioned in the following lines:

C. *The Wind or the Flag: Whalen's Countercultural Intertext*

the wind
flapping the prayer-flags

"IT IS THE WIND MOVING."

"IT IS THE FLAG MOVING."
(Whalen 9 – 12)

In this section, Whalen incorporates a Buddhist reference to challenge dualistic perceptions and authoritarianism. "IT IS THE WIND MOVING/ IT IS THE FLAG MOVING" is a direct allusion to a well-known Zen kōan titled *Case 29: Not the Wind, Not the Flag* (1228 CE) (Yamada, 2004). Kōans are short, puzzling, and often paradoxical statements used in Zen Buddhism to help practitioners reach a moment of sudden enlightenment. Typically, a kōan involves a kind of spiritual test where an enlightened master challenges a student with a surprising or mysterious question or saying. These sayings cannot be understood through normal logic, they require deep reflection to uncover their hidden meaning. When a koan works, it can cause a sudden, powerful awakening (Heine, 2014). In the original kōan that Whalen references, two monks argue over whether a flag is moving or if it is the wind that moves it. A Zen master, interjects, saying, "It is neither the flag nor the wind, it is the mind that moves." What these monks do is that each of them insists on their own perspective that creates dualistic thinking and hierarchy, such as "my perception is more valid than yours." The wise master, however, transcends these binaries by pointing to the mind as a shared field of awareness, a place where all experiences arise and connects all things (Yamada, 2004). His answer removes the boundaries between the "self" and the "other." It implies that what you both see comes from the same source, consciousness, and what is seen is not separate from the one who sees it. As a result, the master erases the illusion of separateness, not just between objects, but between people.

In the same way, Whalen uses the kōan to question modern binary thinking, which comes from the grand narratives that claim one group is superior to the other, like saying "my race is more beautiful than yours," "my gender is smarter than yours," or "my religion is the only true one." During the 1960s, among all the racial, gender, and cultural conflicts, Whalen incorporated this reference to wake readers up to a "new comprehension" in the United States (Gábor, 2025, p.7). This new understanding is his pluralistic, anti-authoritarian worldview, which is influenced by Hippie movements' value of decentralization, interconnectedness of all lives, and resistance to dominant cultural narratives (Xu, 2023). Hence, Whalen uses intertextuality as a countercultural tool to break the traditional system by indicating that wisdom and enlightenment require overcoming dualistic structures and the tendency to impose one's own version of truth onto the world (Bridge & Storhoff, 2009). This interpretation is reinforced by writer Steven Hein, in his book *Zen Koans* (2014), where he explains that kōans influenced the work of American spiritual poets from the Hippie movement, such as Philip Whalen, who used them as

countercultural tools to trigger awareness within the reader and challenge conventional logic (Heine, 2004).

To sum up, Philip Whalen's *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz* (1960) aligns with Hippie movement's interest in Buddhist teachings, marking it as a countercultural work. By using Kristeva's intertextuality, Whalen questions the modern dualistic thinking that separates people from each other. With Derrida's deconstruction, he subverts the identity of the speaker that challenges the modern hierarchy between man and animal. Finally, by drawing on Lyotard's little narratives, Whalen advocates for "dropping out" of mainstream society and returning to nature, which is a core Hippie ideal.

V. JAMES DICKEY'S *THE SHEEP CHILD* (1966)

James Dickey was an American poet and novelist (Calhoun, 1989). He was best known for his mythic explorations of nature, sexuality, transformation, and the human psyche. He rose to prominence in the 1960s and became one of the most distinctive voices in American poetry, due to his countercultural writings (Peckham, 1999). According to scholars, Dickey cultivated a "macho pose in the 60s." He purposely positioned himself against all the traditions of mainstream American culture (Calhoun, 1989, p.84). This rebellious stance is reflected in his engagement with themes of forbidden desire, primitivism, and hybrid identity throughout his literary works. These elements are particularly discussed in his well-known poem *The Sheep Child* (1966) which appears in his collection *Poems, 1957 – 1967*. In this poem, Dickey uses grotesque and sexual scenes to explore societal taboos, hidden aspects of identity, and critique American culture.

A. *The Countercultural Christ: Intertextuality and the Hybrid Other*

The title of the poem "The Sheep Child" presents a paradoxical fusion between two distinct species: a human and an animal. This integration results in a hybrid creature, "The Sheep Child." By mentioning a being that is part human, part animal in the title, Dickey reminds the reader of previous stories of unnatural mixtures. The title echoes earlier cultural and literary representations of hybrid identities. It becomes an example of Kristeva's intertextuality which states that no text is created completely from scratch, they are composed of ideas, words, styles, stories, and cultural references that already exist (Shakib, 2013). In the same way, Dickey's title draws on broader cultural and religious traditions that feature mixed creatures.

In cultural discussions, especially within postmodernism and 1960s America, hybridity is associated with fluid or non-binary identities that challenged the traditional norms of gender and sexuality. During the 1960s, these identities appeared as a countercultural force, influenced by the Hippie movement, which promoted sexual liberation and nonconformity. As a form of active resistance to heteronormative frameworks, many Hippies celebrated their in-betweenness. By doing so, they not only fought for inclusion, but also redefined identity as fluid and hybrid shaped by desire and personal experiences. These countercultural identities ultimately disrupted conventional understandings of gender and sexuality. They created new modes of being that transcended conventional labels and sexual

restrictions (Anderson, 2011). Likewise, Dickey's choice of a hybrid creature "Sheep Child" becomes a metaphor for hybrid countercultural identities during the 1960s. As Guinn (1997) mentions, "Dickey's most sublime creation, The Sheep Child," lets the reader see the world from someone else's point of view. It stresses the importance of "individual experience" (Guinn, 1997, pp.87 – 99). Hence, the reference to queer identities through a hybrid figure is a countercultural strategy by Dickey to bring to attention the perspective and the experience of the queer identities within America.

On the other hand, the phrase "Sheep Child" also references a lamb, which is a Christian symbol associated with Jesus. In Christian tradition, Jesus is often called the "Lamb of God," which represents purity and the connection between the divine and human worlds. Lambs are used as a symbol because they are innocent, earthly creatures, just as Jesus was innocent and embodied God in human form (Hayes, 2008). Through an intertextual method, Dickey suggests that the poem draws on Jesus's story or perhaps the Sheep Child is a Christ-like, divine figure. This connection between Jesus and the titular figure is reinforced in the poem when the Sheep Child declares,

*I am here, in my father's house.
I who am half of your world.
(Dickey 28 – 29)*

The statement "I am here, in my father's house" directly recalls Jesus's first spoken words at a temple when he was twelve years old. It is a biblical reference to the Gospel of Luke 2:49 recorded in the New Testament (Taylor, 2018). Dickey's invocation of this biblical moment during the 1960s aligns with his countercultural message. At that time, hybrid identities, such as those within the queer and LGBTQ communities, began asserting their presence in American society, as they were supported by the Hippie movement. These individuals challenged a culture that had long denied their existence (Ellis, 2020). By beginning with Jesus' first spoken words, the Sheep Child is positioned as a countercultural Christ: a figure who embodies divine otherness and speaks for the marginalized groups that demand recognition within the dominant culture. His divine otherness is further revealed in the following lines where the Sheep Child states,

*with my eyes
Far more than human. I saw for a blazing moment
The great grassy world from both sides,
Man and beast in the round of their need,
And the hill wind stirred in my wool,
My hoof and my hand clasped each other.
(Dickey 40 – 46)*

The lines: "with my eyes / Far more than human," means he sees more than a normal person can, it suggests an omniscient vision that helps the Sheep Child to see "the great grassy world from both sides." This perspective unites the opposites: divine and worldly, man and animal, self and other. This all-encompassing view makes the Sheep Child a countercultural version of Jesus, a messiah who has divine wisdom. What the Sheep Child sees is "Man and beast in the round of their need." Such image breaks the Christian illusion that humans are

morally superior to animals since they are made in God's image, pure and rational, while animals are driven only by desire and sin. Instead, the Sheep Child declares both are united by instinct and need, which affirms his role as the divine other.

According to sociologist Gert Hekma (2013), within the context of the 1960s, Dickey's depiction of shared desire between "man and beast" fits with Hippie movement's weekly "happenings," gatherings where participants engaged in taboo forms of love, such as bestiality and communal sex, as acts of spiritual expression and defiance against Christian heteronormative traditions. Hekma notes that "the 1960s can be seen as the climax of the sexual revolution" (Hekma, 2013, p.49). These liberating movements manifested in events known as "happenings," where "young hippies" organized sexual parties and nude performances as expressions of freedom and rebellion. These public orgies, Hekma quotes, "offered several sexual variations, and included not only heterosexual but also masturbatory, male and female homosexual, and sadomasochistic and bestiality" (Hekma, 2023, pp.56 – 57). In essence, these "happenings" featured intercourses between men and men, women and women, men and women, both with teenagers and animals. Therefore, he characterizes this period as one in which the country "exploded erotically" (Hekma, 2013, p.59). This is because Hippies believed that everyone belongs to everyone else, as part of their belief in the *interconnectedness of all lives*, which means that every person has the right to have sex with anyone or anything else.

In Dickey's poem, when the divine Sheep Child observes this scene, the "hill wind stirred in [his] wool," which portrays a calming, sacred stillness, like a breath of relief. The Sheep Child sees the world as it truly is, and feels at peace with it. As a reaction to this countercultural moment, the Sheep Child states, "My hoof and my hand clasped each other," which is a symbolic image. The gesture resembles prayer, but it is not directed toward a deity. Instead, it is an inward act, a unifying moment between the two parts of his being, animal and human. Unlike traditional Christian prayer, which raises the hands toward heaven in supplication, the Sheep Child's gesture embodies self-unity. This moment can be interpreted as a rebellion against Christian models of worship by replacing divine communion with self-union. Through this clasping gesture, the Sheep Child declares a radical acceptance of hybrid identity and the animalistic instincts shared by all creatures. This makes the Sheep Child a countercultural messenger of oneness, who advocates for a radical freedom from conventional morality, binary constructs, and systems of control.

In this way, Dickey's use of intertextuality operates as a countercultural strategy that subverts traditional Christian moral codes. This technique is similar to how 1960s Hippie writers and artists reused dominant religious and cultural narratives through parody and distortion. They destabilized sacred discourses and reimagines divine figures like Jesus to reclaim it for marginalized voices, particularly queer identities that have been excluded by heteronormative structures of 1960s America. Furthermore, Dickey did not limit himself to subverting religion; he also deconstructed traditional folk tales that were once widely cherished within the culture. This subversion is evident in the following lines:

B. *From Purity to Perversion: Deconstruction in the Pastoral Tradition*

Farm boys wild to couple
With anything with soft-wooded trees
With mounds of earth mounds
Of pinestraw.

(Dickey 1 – 4)

These lines present deconstruction by disrupting traditional binaries of purity versus perversion. The phrase "farm boys" reminds readers of old pastoral traditions. It initially conveys the image of rural, masculine men in traditional environments. This creates an expectation for the reader. They may think the poem will follow pastoral ideas (Chaudhuri, 2016). However, Dickey, as a countercultural writer, quickly breaks this expectation with the phrase "wild to couple." It implies unrestrained sexual desire, either homoerotic or bestial, since the farm setting includes animals, too. This break illustrates Derrida's deconstruction as defined by Noel Gough (2008). Gough writes that deconstruction is when "a text transgresses the laws it appears to set up for itself" (Gough, 2008, p.2). This explains that Deconstruction occurs when a text sets up an idea or an expectation, and then breaks it by presenting something unexpected.

For instance, the opening phrase in Dickey's poem raises pastoral traditions by mentioning "farm boys" which implies innocence and rural virtue. But Dickey deconstructs the idea by showing these boys in scenes filled with homosexuality, bestiality, and wild desire. Instead of showing an innocent shepherd with animals and a female lover, Dickey displays untamed "farm boys" who are engaging in "wild" acts either with each other or with the farm animals. This shocking image shatters the illusion of rural innocence and moral norms within 1960s American society. This is because, historically, pastoral poetry supported Christian values and straight relationships, leaving out people who did not fit those roles. Dickey uses deconstruction to challenge these old rules and restrictions. It is also to reclaim pastoral tradition as a space for expressing the hidden and rejected desires of people from the margins of society, especially during the 1960s. Hence, in *The Sheep Child* (1966), the countryside is no longer a pure, traditional place, it becomes a site of desire, rebellion, and broken norms.

This rebellion and sexual transgression become even more intense in the next line, when Dickey writes, "with anything with soft-wooded trees," a phrase that both deconstructs and reinforces homosexual desire. Here, Dickey pushes desire beyond homoeroticism and bestiality towards ecosexuality, indulgence in sexual relationship with nature as a radical form of environmental activism (Türer, 2020). It was part of the Hippie movement's environmental beliefs, which aimed to raise awareness against the industrial destruction of nature. Hippies believed that nature is sacred and should be protected and loved, not exploited. In *The Sheep Child* (1966), Dickey portrays the "farm boys" mating with nature because he believed that transcendence is only possible "through a return to nature, not in the sense of the Romantics ... but rather by man's reclamation of primitivism" (Guinn, 1997, p.88). This means that true spiritual or emotional freedom comes from

going back to nature, not in a peaceful or poetic way like the Romantics, but in a wild, raw, and primitive way. As Guinn (1997) explains, this involves a complete “submission to the naturalistic urges” (Guinn, 1997, p.97). This act of deconstruction functions as a countercultural tool. Dickey employs it to challenge the constraints on what could be discussed and portrayed, which normalized discussions around sexuality that had long been repressed. After that, Dickey adopts the voice of the Sheep Child itself, through which he challenges the grand narratives of Christianity, as seen in the following section.

C. Unholy Conception and the Collapse of Grand Narratives

*I who am half of your world, came deeply
To my mother in the long grass*

.....

*Listening for foxes. It was something like love
From another world that seized her.*

(Dickey 28 – 32)

In these lines, Dickey gives voice to the Sheep Child itself, the hybrid creature born of an unnatural union. In doing so, he foregrounds a “little narrative” that disrupts the grand religious narratives, which impose moral binaries such as purity/sin, human/animal, and sacred/worldly. This disruption is evident when the Sheep Child states, I “came deeply/ To my mother in the long grass”, which reverses the Christian narrative of Jesus’s birth. Rather than being born from the mother, the Sheep Child proclaims he “came deeply to” his mother which implies ejaculation or penetration. This change destabilizes the reader’s expectation of a conventional birth story and presents a disturbing, transgressive scene between mother and son. This image is a provocative reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which holds that the Virgin Mary was free from original sin and was impregnated not through human intercourse but by the Holy Spirit (Janaro, 2006).

In the context of 1960s, Dickey intentionally used the preposition “to” instead of “from” after the phrase “came deeply.” It is a countercultural method which exemplifies Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of “little narratives” as discussed in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). According to Lyotard, “grand narratives” are official stories that cultures tell to explain everything, like Christianity, in this case. These narratives give people a sense of order, morality and meaning, but they often silence or erase voices that do not fit their version of truth (Taylor & Winkquist 2002). Lyotard argued that postmodern writers break these grand stories by promoting “little narratives”—small, personal, contradictory truths that disrupts what we have traditionally been conditioned with (Taylor & Winkquist, 2002). As postmodern scholar Fran Mason (2017) notes, little narratives expose the darker, repressive, and faulty aspects of grand narratives.

Likewise, Dickey’s use of “came deeply/ To my mother” challenges Christian grand narratives surrounding Jesus’ birth and Mary’s purity. This is because, the Holy Spirit that impregnated Mary is one aspect of the Divine Trinity, which also includes the Son (Jesus) and the Father (Jehovah). Thus, these three entities are inseparable, the same source in different

forms (Waruwu, et al, 2025). Through this logic, it was Jesus who impregnated his own mother. He was both the child and the father. Dickey’s provocative reimagining implicitly critiques this theological divine story by connecting it with an earthy, transgressive alternative. His critique was part of Hippie’s counterculture to actively reject institutional religion, which they saw as a tool of social control and sexual repression. In contrast, the Hippies celebrated taboo-breaking expression, as an act of rebellion against what they viewed as defective, man-made myths designed to control thought and behavior (Lucas, 2009). It becomes a “little narrative” that offers readers a countercultural perspective on Jesus’s divine birth and Mary’s virginity, which have historically shaped traditional American values and preserved norms that prohibit sexual freedom.

Moreover, “Listening for foxes” means the mother was giving in to her erotic and animalistic desires. Regarding the act, ambiguity arises when it is described as “It was something like love / From another world that seized her” which creates undecidability. The reader is left unsure whether the encounter was an act of consensual love, as hinted by “something like love,” or a violation, as implied by the word “seized.” At the same time, the phrase “from another world” opens the door to a divine or supernatural intervention, as in the Christian narrative of Mary’s miraculous conception through the Holy Spirit. In this way, the ethics and nature of the act remain unclear. Instead of completely rejecting Mary’s miraculous conception, Dickey leaves it open to interpretation. This reflects the Hippies’ advocacy for ambiguity, which makes space for little narratives and allows different perspectives to coexist. If Dickey had intentionally eliminated the divine impregnation of Mary, indicated by something “from another world,” he would be replacing one grand narrative with another, his little narrative would also shut down the opposite view.

Furthermore, by reimagining Mary’s conception in a radical, countercultural way, the Sheep Child becomes a Jesus-like figure, a messenger not born through divine intervention and Mary’s chastity, but through a taboo-breaking act, such as adultery or bestiality. It is the product of a forbidden union, whether between an unmarried man and woman or between a human and an animal. In either case, the Sheep Child represents a being that defies the “natural” order as defined by society (Oerlemans, 2018). In the context of the 1960s, it becomes Dickey’s little narrative, a subversive story that challenges the grand Christian myth of the immaculate conception and pushes back against traditional American norms surrounding sex. Additionally, this unfiltered expression of the Sheep-Child reflects the Hippie movement’s values of free expression and rebellion against traditional norms. After that, the Sheep Child reflects on his life as a divine being, quoting:

*I ate my one meal
Of milk, and died
Staring.*

(Dickey 47 – 49)

These lines show a very simple, almost plain version of divine experience. There are no miracles, no acts of salvation, just a moment of drinking milk and quiet observation. This image is, in fact, Dickey’s little narrative to challenge the conventional grand image of what people usually think

enlightenment or divinity is. It is not glowing lights or floating above the earth, or walking on water as depicted in the grand scriptures, it is instead ordinary, calm, and brief. The Sheep Child does not preach, heal others, or rise above the human condition; he simply consumes his “one meal / Of milk” and dies, which is an act that is purely physical and ordinary. In this way, the Sheep Child becomes an alternative prophet, living according the Zen Buddhist idea of *Samu*, which is translated as “mindful labor.”

In Zen, *Samu* means doing ordinary tasks, like sweeping the floor, washing dishes, gardening, or eating, with complete mindfulness and presence. This idea, in 1960s America, is countercultural, as it indicates that enlightenment is not separate from everyday life. There is no need to retreat to sacred spaces, like churches or temples, to find truth; truth is in this moment, this act (Baccarani, et al, 2013). This explains that enlightenment requires a person to return to daily life, but now with full awareness. In Zen, there is a famous proverb: “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water” (Freedle, 2015, p.1). This illustrates that life does not change outwardly, but your awareness of it does. This idea fits with the Hippie’s belief that challenged Christianity. They redefined divinity and sacredness not as something distant or confined to churches and strict rules of the scriptures. Instead, they believed the sacred lies in the ordinary. Doing simple things, like walking, eating, listening to music or making love, can be spiritual if you are really present and aware. Ultimately, the Sheep Child becomes Dickey’s little narrative, a countercultural anti-gospel divine other that critiques mainstream Christian values.

In conclusion, Dickey’s *The Sheep Child* (1966) stands out as a provocative countercultural work. Using intertextuality, the poem invites many different interpretations. It connects the Sheep Child’s mixed identity to the queer identities of 1960s America and presents the creature as a kind of countercultural messenger of unity. Through deconstruction, Dickey subverts pastoral traditions by fusing it with all kinds of sexual transgressions, like homoeroticism, bestiality, and ecosexuality. Using the idea of little narratives, Dickey gives the Sheep Child its own voice, reimagining the Christian story of Jesus’s birth to create a new, divine outsider. His challenge to religious tradition mirrors the Hippie movement’s support for taboo-breaking expressions and questioning religion.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, this study focused on the 1960s countercultural Hippie movement and how it influenced postmodern American poetry. It analyzed three poems: Robert Duncan’s *Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow* (1960), Philip Whalen’s *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz* (1960), and James Dickey’s *The Sheep Child* (1966). The paper explored how these poets used techniques like deconstruction, intertextuality, and little narratives as tools to challenge the values of mainstream American society. While all three poets used these methods, they applied them in different ways. For example, Duncan used Derrida’s deconstruction at the sentence level when describing the meadow to allow multiple interpretations. Whalen used deconstruction to question the modern hierarchy of humans being more important than animals. Dickey used

deconstruction at the phrase level, where he started with peaceful and pastoral scene, but suddenly introduced bold sexual themes. This broke traditional views of both rural life and sexuality.

In terms of Kristeva’s intertextuality, Duncan draws on Plato’s allegory of the cave but reverses its meaning to fit his countercultural rejection of mainstream materialism. Whalen also uses intertextuality by referencing a well-known Zen koan to encourage readers to overcome dualism. Dickey uses intertextuality by alluding to Jesus’s words from the Bible, which presents the Sheep Child as a countercultural messenger that advocates for oneness and the voice of the marginalized people.

Pertaining Lyotard’s concept of little narratives, each poet uses personal stories to challenge traditional beliefs. Duncan uses a little narrative, when he challenges the belief that life moves in a straight line and ends at death, by presenting life as a repeating cycle of reincarnation. Whalen uses little narratives to break down traditional strict labels of good and bad. Dickey uses a little narrative by letting the Sheep Child speak for itself. The creature tells the story of its birth and its role as a kind of divine figure. This turns the Christian story of Jesus upside down by showing divinity as something grotesque, natural, and ordinary, instead of pure, miraculous, or full of salvation.

In short, all three poets used postmodern techniques as countercultural strategies to challenge traditional American ideologies. This indicates that postmodern poetic methods were indeed inspired by the countercultural movement of the 1960s, namely the Hippie movement. As a result, this study clarifies how cultural movements influenced literary writing styles. It also provides a model for analyzing poetry by linking the literary strategies to the social and spiritual ideas of the time.

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