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Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* in the Context of the British Youth Subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s

Čestné prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci vypracovala samostatně pod vedením Mgr. Petra Anténeho, Ph.D. s využitím pramenů, které jsou uvedeny v bibliografii.

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Obsah

Abstract

The thesis focuses on the phenomenon of youth subcultures appearing in Great Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. In the theoretical part, the reasons behind the influx of these subcultures are investigated, specific youth subcultures are then defined in regards of their style, beliefs and manners. The phenomenon of "Swinging London" and the Liverpool rock scene is then described. In the practical part, the analysis of the novel *Absolute Beginners* by Colin MacInnes is provided, mainly concentrating on the youth subcultures and the teenage community the book focuses on.

Introduction

This thesis focuses on the novel *Absolute Beginners* (1959) by Colin MacInnes in the context of British youth subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s. The motivation behind the choice of this topic is my interest in music of the time, especially the early days of rock'n'roll. Music was one of the main aspects of certain youth subcultures as it was a way of the presentation of their opinions, beliefs and style. The choice of the book then originates in its concentration on the targeted topic.

The main goal of the thesis is to provide an analysis of the novel *Absolute Beginners* which will focus on the youth subcultures and the social changes of the post-war society in Great Britain. The analysis will describe how the author saw these subcultures and how he depicted them in his novel and whether he was successful in the authenticity of the novel.

The first chapter's goal is to provide a description of the British youth subcultures, their backgrounds, style, manners and beliefs. This is achieved by firstly providing an insight into British society in the Second World War and its post-war development and the basic description of the welfare state which also played a crucial role in the development of the teenage movement. Secondly, the first chapter provides an insight into the theory of subcultures and finally the description of most important subcultures appearing in British society in the 1950s and 1960s – the ted, mod, skinhead and rocker subculture – is provided, including their style, opinions, origin and manners.

The practical part begins with the biography of the author of the novel *Absolute Beginners*, Colin MacInnes. Then it provides an overview of the *London Trilogy* which *Absolute Beginners* is a part of. The reason behind the choice of only this novel for the purposes of this thesis is also stated. The practical part then continues with the analysis of the novel itself which is divided into three chapters. In the first one, the narrative form of the novel is analysed as well as the reasons why the author chose such form for this novel. The second chapter focuses on the protagonist of the novel, his opinions, beliefs and relationship to different subcultures appearing in the book. The practical part is then finished with a chapter focusing on the generational differences between the teenagers and their parents. This is achieved by analysing the characters of the protagonist's parents. The whole analysis is related to the theoretical part and the phenomena it described.

1. Theoretical part

1.1. Sociological background

1.1.1.   Changes in British Society during and after the Second World War

As a country celebrating tradition, Britain and its society worked on the principles of class-system for centuries. With the *fin de siècle* and the gradual growth of the middle class, this system became less and less appropriate and the society went through a vital change. This change was enhanced by the two world wars in the first half of the 20th century, especially the Second World War.

From the point of view of society, the Second World War period is regarded as probably the only time the British people adopted a communal spirit. During this time of horror, people stopped defining others on the account of their social class, family income, their self-interest or political views.[1] Jose Harris claims that during the war period, a significant community spirit appeared in British society. Even though the horrors of the war were great, the people managed to begin to act in a more understanding way to each other. The terrors of the war also made the government retreat from their original programme, which was focusing on the state's economy, and adopt a new system of planning, economic management and rationing. Therefore the British society had to adapt to larger state regulation in different aspects. This stage became, according to politicians and historians, the cradle of the welfare state.[2]

After the Second World War, the society was already used to the state intervening into the lives of its citizens and it, therefore, welcomed the welfare reforms of the Labour party in 1948. Suddenly, when the state pledged to provide funds to those in need, it was the end of the traditional British class system that existed for centuries. At the same time, the British empire was experiencing a decline as well, for the post-war period was the time most of the colonies strived to separate themselves from the empire and gain their own independence. This resulted in the crisis of the celebrated "Englishness" and an influx of immigrants from the colonies. In the 1950s, Britain had to deal with other world problems including the events of the Cold War – e.g. the Suez crisis in 1956.

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[1] Harris, War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War, s. 17.
[2] Harris, War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War, s. 17.

In this period of general confusion of British people, the first wave of teenagers born after (or close to) the end of the Second World War started to take its place in the society. According to Jacqueline Feldman, British youth started to search for new identities that would "challenge notions of cultural "belonging" to a particular social class or even to the nation."[3] They thought themselves above the problems of the state and culture.

1.1.2.   The Beginnings of the Welfare State

Even though this thesis focuses on society and its changes in the 1950s, the welfare system constituted in 1948, being a political phenomenon, played a crucial part in the process.

In the period before the Second World War, Britain experienced a rise in unemployment and problems connected to it. That led the war-time government to invite William Beveridge – an economist that was in charge of the department of welfare at the war-time Ministry of Labour – to report on the social insurance of the state. In his Report of 1942, Beveridge proposed that employers and employees would contribute to a unified, comprehensive and compulsory state insurance scheme. The insurance scheme would then provide compensation for people in sickness, old age and unemployment. The compensation would be regardless of their income.[4]

In 1948, the Labour government with Clement Atlee as a Prime Minister turned those recommendations into reality and Britain became a "welfare state". Together with National Insurance and National Assistance, National Health Service, family allowances and children's service were introduced.[5] The country realised that while being a prospering market economy, it also must pay attention to its citizens and provide them with social welfare. The new welfare system was aimed at the whole British population regardless of their income or social class, therefore it became rather popular in the society for it solved the insecurities of the citizens. At the beginning of the 1960s, the general optimism connected to the welfare system started to slowly disappear. The previous assumptions that with the introduction of the welfare state, poverty would be eliminated from the society began to fade. Poverty was given a new definition – it was no longer a condition of being on the edge of a minimum and essentially fixed living standard but it

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[3] Feldman, 'We are the Mods': A Transnational History of a Youth Culture, s. 72.
[4] Childs, *Encyclopedia Of Contemporary British Culture*, s. 559.
[5] Childs, *Encyclopedia Of Contemporary British Culture*, s. 559.

became a condition which would change in the same manner as the current living standards in Britain whose economy was becoming more prosperous.[6]

The critics of the welfare state, mainly coming from the political right, claimed that because of Britain becoming a welfare state, the country had become a poor country. They argued that the citizens had become crucially dependent on the state and therefore they started to lack the motivation to improve, the initiative, as they rely on the state to look after all of their needs and therefore they avoid their own responsibilities.[7] However, the social securities that the welfare provided to the British people since it was introduced in 1948 were definitely one of the reasons for the post-war baby boom which led to the rise of the teenage movements in the late 1950s and the 1960s.

1.2. British Youth Subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s

1.2.1. Definition of a "subculture"

To define a certain "subculture", we must understand where it takes its roots from and what led to its birth. To plainly describe the relationship between the relevant subculture and culture providing the complete basis, experts named the latter a "parent" culture – though this should not be confused with the culture of the subculture followers' parents. Even though some of the values or ways of presenting the beliefs might crucially differ, there are still some features that the "parent" culture and its relevant subculture have in common. A "parent" culture provides the complete basis and background for the subculture derived from it.[8] However, a subculture must provide some of its own aspects that are from the "parent" culture to become entirely identifiable. Usually, a subculture focuses on particular activities, values or territories whereas a "parent" culture is more widely understood and applicable more in general.

Experts distinguish a few different types of subcultures. Clarke et al. mention a type of subculture differing from the "parent" culture only in some aspects – e.g. in the territory where it appears – those subcultures are loosely defined. On the other hand, the authorities also mention subcultures which differ from the "parent" culture in their structures, and develop their own identity. Those are therefore tightly defined. When the latter groups are identified not only by their particular activities, structures and focal concerns but also

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[6] Childs, *Encyclopedia Of Contemporary British Culture*, s. 559.
[7] Storry, Childs, *British cultural identities*, s. 103.
[8] Clarke, Harris a kol., Subcultures, cultures and class, s. 13.

by the age and generation of their followers, we call these "youth subcultures".[9] Youth subcultures rise from the environment of social and cultural life. Some of them are an inseparable part of their "parent" culture which appear regularly regardless the time period – Clarke et al. use the example of the "culture of delinquency" of the working class.[10] Other youth subcultures are on the contrary perceived as a mirror of the current situation or disposition of the society for they appear only when a certain situation or a problem occurs in the society, disappearing when the social situation changes once again. Their difference from each other lays in the possible solutions to a certain social problem. The members of the subculture then present the solution to the rest by the style of their dressing, their manners or their leisure activities.[11]

1.2.2.   Development of youth subcultures in Great Britain

The strong increase of youth subcultures in Great Britain was caused by a few different factors. The first reason for the youth cultures to develop in the 1950s and 1960s Britain might lay in the fact that the period was the first in history to consider young people as a separate social group. In the past, people were considered only as children or as adults with no transition period between the two stages. According to Clarke et al. the "youth" appeared to be one of the most visible manifestations of social change in post-war Britain.[12] As Smith et al. argue, it was "the compressed image of a society which had crucially changed in terms of basic lifestyles and values"[13] As the children of the British baby boom of the 1950s were hitting their adolescence and adapting to their newly gained role in the society, the country was slowly turning from the post-war gloomy greyness to a shining demonstration of youth. According to History.co.uk, in the mid-1960s, the urban population was the youngest since the times of the Roman empire with 40% of the population being 25 years old or younger.[14] 1960 was also a year when the National Service was abolished for men – the youth, therefore, had more freedom and fewer responsibilities than the previous generations ever experienced. Still, the youth rebelled against the post-war restrictions and yearned for a change.

Hitting the 1950s, British identity experienced a vital crisis. For a country that emphasised the "Englishness" and its importance for centuries and now experiencing a gradual

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9 Clarke, Harris a kol.., Subcultures, cultures and class, s. 14.
10 Clarke, Harris a kol.., Subcultures, cultures and class, s. 14.
11 Clarke, Harris a kol., Subcultures, cultures and class, s. 9-10.
12 Clarke, Harris a kol., Subcultures, cultures and class, s. 9.
13 Citováno v Clarke, Harris a kol., Subcultures, cultures and class, s. 9-10.
14 Swinging 60s – Capital of Cool.

collapse of its empire, this was rather confusing. The aftermaths of the Second World War and the gradual collapse of the British Empire brought the social revolution that is mentioned in the previous chapter. The South Bank Exhibition in London in 1951 aimed to introduce a "new" British identity and establish a new international position for the country. However, as Simon Rycroft states, the aim of the exhibition was not met completely. It left the foreign visitors still wondering, what the famous "Englishness" meant for the British people who were asking the same question themselves.[15] The country and its society also experienced the approach of new influences coming mainly from its colonies, the newly constituted Europe and from behind the Atlantic Ocean. These influences brought by the wave of immigration changed the face of the country forever.

The post-war period in Britain witnessed the birth of many youth subcultures – the teds, the mods, the rockers, skinheads or hippies, to name a few. In this chapter, I will mention those that were the most significant youth subcultures in the targeted period of the 1950s and 1960s – the teds, the mods, the skinheads and the rockers.

1.2.3.   The "Ted" Subculture

The "ted" subculture – also referred to as "teds" or "teddy boys" – was a British subculture of the mid-1950s. They were mostly working-class young men who adopted the dressing style of an Edwardian dandy. Their clothes included long loose jackets, which were called "drape coats", very narrow trousers – "drainpipes", and leather shoes referred to as "brothel creepers". The "teddy boys" styled their hair with a special oil, therefore, it stood up at the front. They were associated with rock'n'roll music, a tendency of forming violent gangs, riding motorcycles and macho behaviour. In the early 1960s, many teds became rockers.[16] [17]

Even though the country experienced a periodical rise of unemployment and even though teds were often qualified for only unskilled jobs, together with other adolescents of the time they were rather affluent. The Teds were, therefore, able to spend money which was necessary for purchasing the Teddy boy "uniform". The clothes that were a part of the uniform were, as already mentioned, originally a signature of the Edwardian dandies, who

[15] Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. 568.
[16] Crowther, *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*, s. 531.
[17] Childs, *Encyclopedia Of Contemporary British Culture*, s. 520.

were mostly from the upper-class. In the 1950s, the Edwardian suits became more affordable to the lower classes as they became unwearable by the upper classes.

The violent and rebellious behaviour of teds was reflecting their desire for complete freedom, a new open-minded world. According to Tony Jefferson, this behaviour might be also connected to their extreme touchiness on insults. Most of the insults on Teds revolved around their appearances, their dress and looks in general.[18] Teds were also very loyal to their group which, as Jefferson states, was a "reaffirmation of traditional working-class values and the strong sense of territory".[19]

The reputation of the Teddy boys and their attacks on others preceded them. Besides their extreme touchiness to insults coming to them as a response to their style of clothing, Teds were also involved in violent incidents of a different kind. With the immigration wave approaching Britain, the teds felt their position in British society endangered. Teds were understood to be the "lumpen" youths of the society and felt a certain connection in the increase of immigration and the worsening of their position. However, Tony Jefferson claims that such a connection was not present and the two truths – the current position of the teds in society and the influx of the immigrants – were rather coincidental.[20] Jefferson then adds another reason for the violence against immigrants – especially Cypriots and West Indians – that the teds were committing. The subculture felt the success of some immigrants in their new homeland was present at their own expense. They, therefore, loathed the Cypriots who owned and ran a café or coloured landlords. Having a different skin colour, the immigrants had restricted working options. The myth a coloured immigrant is either a pimp, a landlord or a racketeer became then very popular inside the ted community. As the two groups often lived in the same inner urban areas and were therefore sentenced to come to contact with each other, the situation resulted in several race riots. The most famous race riots, as Jefferson states, happened in 1958 in Notting Hill and Nottingham. In these incidents, the teds were joined by other members of the white working class which, as Jefferson points out, is the evidence that teds were not the only social group feeling their social position endangered by the influx of the immigration. The response of the authorities to these incidents of 1958 was not helpful to the solution of a structural problem it was a result of. For the 1950s were a period of

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[18] Jefferson, Cultural Responses of the Teds: The defence of space and status, s. 82.
[19] Jefferson, Cultural Responses of the Teds: The defence of space and status s. 81.
[20] Jefferson, Cultural Responses of the Teds: The defence of space and status, s. 82.

"affluence", the authorities refused to admit any structural issues and punished only the nine original working-class adolescent perpetrators to four years in prison.

1.2.4.   The "Mod" Subculture

The origins of the subculture known as "the mods" date back to the late 1950s. However, it was in the 1960s that the subculture became a part of the mainstream for the teenagers of that time. The term "mod" is a derivation of "modernist" which was at first used mainly in the connection to modern jazz played by the black jazzmen in New York. With time, this word has become an "umbrella-term" being used to name several types of styles, especially those connected to the phenomenon called "swinging London", which will be dealt with later on. For the purposes of this thesis, the term "mod" is used to describe the 1960s subculture of working-class teenagers from London and new cities of South Britain.[21]

The theories of the origins of mods might differ from each other. There are multiple influences that need to be examined. Dick Hebdige in his "Meaning of Mod" investigates different cultures that might have been very influential. As the title of the subculture suggests, one of these influences was the modern jazz culture of the black youth in the United States. Another impact on the birth of mods that Hebdige mentions was the romanticised gangster culture coming from the Italian-American mafiosos as well as from the British gangsters. The gangster lifestyle, nightlife and quarrels with rival gangs were very appealing and easy to adopt by the British youth.[22] George Melly adds that the predecessor of the mod subculture were the dandies from the working-class following the Italian style of fashion.[23] As the last influence, Hebdige mentions the influence of the West-Indian culture of immigrants coming to the United Kingdom, especially then the "rude boy" subculture. The mods were the first youth culture to grow up next to the West Indians that accepted some of the features of their culture.[24]

The style of the mods was very minimalistic. The mod-uniform consisted of a perfectly fitting Italian suit with a vest, short cut trousers and jackets paired with a white shirt and pointed Italian boots, all of which the mods bought on Carnaby Street in London.[25] According to Goldman, a mod was a "typical lower-class dandy" obsessed with details

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[21] Hebdige, The Meaning of Mod: The defence of space and status, s. 87.
[22] Hebdige, The Meaning of Mod: The defence of space and status, s. 89.
[23] Citováno v Hebdige, The Meaning of Mod: The defence of space and status, s. 87.
[24] Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of style*, s. 52.
[25] Pysňáková, Mainstreamová kultura mládeže, s. 243.

of his dress.[26] The mods chose an Italian Vespa scooter, which was primarily viewed as a vehicle mainly used by women, as their signature vehicle which they managed to transform into the symbol of their youthfulness.[27] In contrast to the teddy boys, who were more of a defiant culture, according to Hebdige, the mod style appeared to be subtler, their suits were conservative and traditional, in respectable colours, and always tidy. The hairstyle of a mod was always short and tidy, styled with an invisible lacquer – in contrast with the rocker-style connected with the more masculine grease.[28]

Although mods came mainly from the middle-class families, their origin was not of any importance for them and they despised it. Pysňáková points out the philosophy of the subculture was not focused on the past, on the contrary, it lay in the future concentrating on which life path a person chooses. In contrast with the youth subculture that preceded them, the teddy boys, the mods did not stand against the generation of their parents, nor did they explicitly define themselves to be against the mainstream. On the contrary, the mods used the mainstream media for broadcasting popular music performers. For example, musicians such as The Beatles, Rufus Thomas, Aretha Franklin or The Who appeared in the Ready, Steady, Go! programme, as Pysňáková adds.[29] The medialisation of the mods then led to the subculture slowly falling into the mainstream and the British youth started to copy the mod-style.

During the 1960s, as Stan Cohen finds, the mods split into several style groups. For instance, "hard mods" wearing heavy boots and jeans with braces were very much polarised from the more extravagant mods who were transferring into "fashion-conscious hippies".[30] With the end of the 1960s, the subculture began to disappear from society. Nevertheless, their spirit never really vanished with the "hard-mods" slowly turning into a new subculture, the skinheads.

1.2.5.   The Skinheads

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the skinheads originally rose from the mod culture and created their own space in British society in the late 1960s. The skinheads were a subculture of paradox and contrast. In contradiction of their predecessors, the mods, who were always dressed very neatly in clean suits and shiny lacquers, the

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[26] Citováno v Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 52.
[27] Pysňáková, Mainstreamová kultura mládeže, s. 244.
[28] Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 52.
[29] Pysňáková, Mainstreamová kultura mládeže, s. 244.
[30] Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 55.

skinheads saw it as a symbol of bourgeois influences which they despised. According to Phil Cohen, skinheads had a very short haircut, wore short wide Levi's jeans (sometimes only rolled up), braces, plain or striped shirts and highly polished Doctor Martens boots – those boots gave the skinheads their first nickname, "boot boys". Cohen adds the skinheads represented the "metastatement of the social mobility" by the exaggeration of only those parts of the mod style that responded to their proletarian beliefs and completely suppressed those symbolising the bourgeois influence.[31]

The skinheads took the inspiration not only from the mod subculture but also significantly from the white working-class community as well as from the culture of the West Indian immigrants coming to Great Britain mainly from Jamaica and the Caribbean countries. As different as these two cultural approaches might seem, skinheads managed to combine them in their visual style and manners which was the mixture of both – taking the sense of territory, rough looking or machismo behaviour from the white working class and elements of the "rude boy" culture of the West Indians. Skinheads borrowed individual elements of traditional West Indian clothing and styles as well as their jargon, insults, dance moves or music styles such as reggae or ska. [32]

The subculture aimed for a symbolic revival of the traditional working-class culture in society. As absurd as it might seem from the 21st-century point of view, the skinheads attempted to do so not only by congregating on the all-white terraces at football matches but also by meeting with West Indians at the youth clubs, listening to their music and absorbing their culture. The skinheads managed to "magically recover" the sense of the working-class community.[33]

With the arrival of the 1970s, the original skinhead subculture experienced a decline. On the word of Ian Taylor and Dave Wall, the main factors were the "collapse of the working class weekend", the "bourgeoisification of football and leisure in general" and the sensitisation of "consumer capitalism to a market available for a class-based product".[34] To those factors, Hebdige adds the change in the ideology inside the reggae subculture which lay in the threat of excluding the white youths. The music also started to be mainly dedicated to the race issues and the Rastafarianism which was not as appealing to the

[31] Citováno v Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s.55.
[32] Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 55.
[33] Hebdige*, Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 56.
[34] Citováno v *Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 58.

skinheads as the music style was beforehand.[35] The factors resulted in the collapse of the truce between these very different groups of youths. Well and Taylor mention the "crucial date in the 'natural history' of the skinheads" – summer 1972 when skinheads, joined by other white residents, attacked the second generation of immigrants in Toxteth area of Liverpool.[36]

1.2.6. The "Rocker" Subculture

According to the Encyclopedia of Contemporary British Culture, rockers firstly appeared in British society in the 1960s. They assimilated an image of a "bad boy" wearing black leather jackets, biker boots, faded jeans and riding powerful motorcycles. Rockers were also infamous for their violent behaviour. The subculture was influenced mainly by the style of the American singer Elvis Presley or the American actor Marlon Brando. Rockers used grease to style their hair to achieve a "masculine" look – for which they earned the unflattering nickname "greasers". The subculture's followers did not come from wealthy backgrounds, on the contrary, they often had a low-payed manual job. Therefore, their violence can be interpreted as a rebellion against the British post-war system.[37]

When experts write about the rocker subculture, it is almost every time in a connection of the mod-rocker quarrels. John Clarke states that a certain subculture's development sometimes lies in a response to a different culture present at the time period. These two groups then grow next to each other and make defining against each other a part of their ideology. The clearest example of the two subcultures are the mods and rockers, which developed in directly oppositional ways.[38] When addressing each other, these two groups did not comment on anything positive – the mods mocked the rockers' portrayal of a traditional masculine self-image and as a contrast, they put their own "cool" and sophisticated looks. Hebdige adds the mods' disapproval of the transparency of the rockers' motives and their clumsiness. Rockers, on the other hand, despised the effeminate look of the mods, their cleanness and tidiness.[39]

The rivalry of these two youth subcultures became famous for the street fights happening at British seaside resorts – Brighton, Hastings and Margate – in 1964. Earlier that year, other violent incidents took place in Clacton. Those were then by the mainstream media

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[35] Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 58.
[36] Citováno v *Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, s. 59.
[37] Childs, *Encyclopedia Of Contemporary British Culture*, s. 459.
[38] Clarke, Style: The Creation of Style, s. 181.
[39] Clarke, Style: The Creation of Style, s. 182.

presented as the fights solely between the rockers and the mods even though, as Stan Cohen claims, they were "based around divisions, not between Mod vs. Rocker, but between locals and those down from London".[40] The false presentation of the escalated rivalry worsened the relationship between the mods and the rockers and set the ground for the seaport violent incidents which were exclusively between those two groups of youths.[41]

1.3. Cultural centres in the 1950s and 1960s

1.3.1. Swinging London

In the 1960s, the cultural world centred around one city – London. Many scholars, in fact, use the term "Swinging London" as a synonym for the 1960s. The West End became a global phenomenon for it absorbed all of the anti-system subcultures fighting against the London-Oxbridge grip.[42] The reasons for the cultural change of the city lay in the change of society. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the first generation of the post-war baby boom was turning into its teenage years and longing for freedom that the previous generations did not experience. Their parents' youth was massively influenced by the Second World War as they were summoned to fight for the British empire. The parents wanted their children to make use of the possibilities of the free modern world. As the 1950s were still full of the post-war gloom and greyness, the youth had no desire in living in such world. From the mid-1950s, the authorities experienced a crisis leading to the birth of different subcultures described above and alternative ways of opinion expressions.[43]

For the first time in history, the youth also became an important part of the working class, therefore they had an income to spend which was crucial for the blossom of the art scene in London. Young people started spending money on current fashion pieces, music records, design products and essentially all things that would overlay the greyness of the post-war society. The fashion madness brought young men to Carnaby Street for new examples of the mod-uniform and young girls to Mary Quant's iconic store "Bazaar" on King's Road which was selling radical mini-skirts. The London fashion revolution was enhanced by the new faces of the era – super models Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy.[44] As

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[40] Citováno v Clarke, Style: The Creation of Style, s. 182.
[41] Hebdige, The Meaning of Mod: The defence of space and status, s. 88.
[42] Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. 567.
[43] Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. .567
[44] Swinging 60s – Capital of Cool.

Becky E. Conekin states in her article "Fashioning Mod Twiggy and the moped in 'swinging' London" Twiggy became the symbol of the "Swinging Sixties" by becoming a famous poster-girl as she rose from the hair salon assistant to an internationally known supermodel. Twiggy was seen as the "epitome of the youthful, classless, energetic spirit of this mythic time".[45]

As important as fashion was, music also became an inseparable part of Swinging London. Although rock'n'roll beginnings lead us to the 1950s, it was not until the 1960s that it experienced a massive boom. The music reflected the spirit of society. On account of the revolutionising lyrics of the 1960s bands, the youth started to stand up against the system and fight for their visions and individuality. Even though Liverpool was the city that witnessed the birth of one of the most famous bands in all history – The Beatles, London still remained the music centre of the country. The London scene produced bands like The Who, The Kinks, The Rolling Stones or The Small Faces which all became legends that would influence the music industry for decades. The art scene of the 1960s London attracted artists of all kinds from all over the country – writers, poets, magazine publishers, photographers, advertisers, filmmakers or designers.[46]

One of the main aims of Swinging London was to create a new classless society that would be administered by the "New Aristocrats" or "meritocracy" – a group of people put in charge because of their influence or merit. This aim was fulfilled only partially, as Richard Hoggard claims, the society became truly classless only in the cultural point of view. However, in the political or economic respect, the classes in the society still remained.[47] Therefore, the classless society became more of a myth than a reality.

On 15th April 1966, the Time magazine published an issue dedicated to the 1960s London, entitled London: The Swinging City. As Rycroft writes, describing the text, "like Vienna of the 1910s, Paris of the 1920s, Berlin of the 1930s and New York of the 1950s, for the Time columnists, London was now the place that set the social and cultural markers for the rest of the world".[48] London became once again a "lusty town of William Shakespeare", the theatre was on the rise as well as the film industry and the city was ruled by the "swinging meritocracy".[49] The Time issue then provided a map of the major

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[45] Conekin, Fashioning Mod Twiggy and the moped in 'swinging' London, s. 212.
[46] Swinging 60s – Capital of Cool.
[47] Citováno v Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. 575.
[48] Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. 576.
[49] Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. 577.

London scenes where the "swinging city" could be experienced the most. What all of those areas have in common was the ability to combine the American cultural influence with the old-fashioned British style. The social change was shown on the description of London's expanding casino businesses, Carnaby Street and Kings Road's boutiques and fashion stores, and the famous club scene. The map provided in the issue illustrates the fact that because of the structural change of power in British society, the heart of the city moved westwards to the areas like Mayfair or Soho.[50]

The youth revolution was also reflected in the architecture of the city as London was becoming a modern futuristic place portraying the young spirit. However, the "swinging sixties" were also a time of an immigration wave from the British colonies. In 1961, there were over 100,000 West Indies immigrants and the city was not capable of providing the housing for such numbers. The buildings that were bombed during the Second World War had still not been repaired in full scale and the London slums were not appropriate for living anymore. With the immigration wave as well as the growth of the urbanization, London needed an effective solution which in the end lay in building whole estates of tower blocks, which changed the skyline of London forever.

The "Swinging Sixties" were a decade that celebrated the young spirit, individuality, freedom in every aspect and the much needed cultural revolution. However, with the growth of unemployment in the 1970s and the decrease of industry, British society fell to depression again, putting an end to such a phenomenal era.

1.3.2. Liverpool

When searching for the cultural centres of the 1950s and 1960s, Liverpool could be seen as another capital after London. In this chapter, I will describe the reasons behind the overwhelming growth of youth culture in the city in the second half of the 20th century.

According to Sara Cohen, the fact that Liverpool was in the past one of the most important British seaports played a crucial role in the cultural development of the area. In her book, Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making, she states that Liverpool has very much in common with the birthplace of jazz music, New Orleans. These two seaports, although they lay on different ends of the Atlantic Ocean, are similar from the economic, cultural and social point of view with both being exposed to a large number of

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[50] Rycroft, The geographies of Swinging London, s. 577.

different cultures brought in by the ships.[51] The character of Liverpool often being perceived as assertive and masculine is a reflection of sailors. Also, the large number of music clubs, cabarets and pubs opened in that area is connected with sailors coming to the city centre on their leave.

The area where Liverpool lays, Merseyside, has always had rich music and performing arts tradition. As mentioned above, foreign cultures had a large impact on the Liverpool music scene. The music scene reflected the influx of foreign cultures entering the port. The collective spirit that the music scene brought may lay in the traditions of Welsh and Irish immigrants who encouraged everyone to join regardless of their age or talent.[52]

In the 1950s and 1960s, Liverpool experienced a massive influx of American culture. For there was a direct New York – Liverpool sea route, sailors started transporting American music records or guitars to Liverpool which could not be found anywhere else in Britain. Most of the people in Liverpool had a relative that used to go to the sea and brought back some of the records. This influenced that massive growth of bands playing "skiffle" – a mixture of the folk, jazz and blues music style – in the 1950s. These bands evolved to rock bands in the 1960s. American promoters saw this as an opportunity to bring American artists overseas, namely to Liverpool.[53]

The new music attracted mostly young people who started forming gangs. As Michael Braun writes in his Love Me Do!: "Beatles" Progress, according to the local disc jockey, Bob Wooler, Liverpool became the "city of gangs". Wooler then adds that with the less and fewer workspaces available, young people started to spend more time playing music – "the noise may be deafening but it's better than having them in the streets with chains".[54] According to the Liverpool Corporation, the number of teenage music clubs, in Liverpool basically doubled, and a similar increase could be seen in gambling and cabaret clubs. These clubs became a place for teenage gangs to meet. The most famous of the clubs was The Cavern which is closely connected to the early days of the band The Beatles. The Beatles represented what it meant to be a teenager in the 1960s. They became the first band coming from the city that made their Liverpool cultural heritage a part of their

[51] Cohen, *Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making*, s. 9.
[52] Cohen, *Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making*, s. 10.
[53] Cohen, *Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making*, s. 10-11.
[54] Citováno v Cohen, *Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making*, s. 11.

success. The fame of the band led to an even greater increase in music production in Liverpool and encouraged even more teenagers to form a rock band.[55]

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[55] Cohen, *Rock culture in Liverpool: popular music in the making*, s. 13.

2. Practical part

2.1. The author

Colin MacInnes was born on 20th August 1914 in London, only a couple of weeks after the beginning of First World War. His mother, using a pseudonym Angela Thirkell, was a well-known novelist of the interwar period, a relative of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones as well as the writer Rudyard Kipling.[56] Colin MacInnes' father, James Campbell McInnes, was a baritone from Scotland, who has become infamous for his drinking and engagement in numerous sexual affairs with women.[57] The couple divorced only three years after the birth of their son Colin. A year later, Angela Thirkell remarried to an Australian officer of engineers, whose name she took. Together with the family, they emigrated to Melbourne, Australia, in 1919. MacInnes' mother could not escape her British upper-class upbringing and moved from Melbourne back to England, leaving Colin and his brother to her parents' upbringings while they were finishing their studies in Australia.[58] MacInnes returned to Europe in 1930. Because of disputes with his mother, he moved to Belgium where he secured employment. In the same time, he managed to reunite with his father, taking his surname for his own. In 1936, Colin MacInnes moved back to London, convinced to pursue a career as a painter. His intended career was however disturbed with the outbreak of the Second World War to which MacInnes contributed by joining the British army where he served for the intelligence corps until the end of the war in 1945.[59]

After the Second World War, Colin MacInnes pursued a different kind of career than he first intended and became a writer. At first, he wrote radio scripts for the BBC Broadcasting Corporation and became a freelance journalist. At the same time, MacInnes was finishing his first novel which was initially an autobiography describing his war service. His following novel was dedicated to adolescents growing up in Australia and gave MacInnes the opportunity to explore the lives of the teenagers living in the post-war world – a social group that was overlooked by most of the then writers. Colin MacInnes decided to explore the topic of teenagers furthermore in his following novels, also known as the *London Trilogy* or the *London Novels*.[60] The trilogy opened by *City of Spades*

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[56] White, Colin MacInnes: 'Absolute Beginners'.
[57] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.
[58] White, Colin MacInnes: 'Absolute Beginners'.
[59] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.
[60] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.

(1957) in which he concentrates on the emergent black culture. The second book of the trilogy, *Absolute Beginners* (1959), focuses on the teenage misfits, the rising London subcultures, and is essentially an overview of the rising London teenage culture of the late 1950s because of which this book was chosen for the purposes of this thesis. The trilogy is finished by *Mr Love and Justice* (1960) which MacInnes centres around the themes of prostitution and the life of the working-class. With the trilogy, MacInnes documented the life of the London misfits, prostitutes and their ponces, homosexuals, and mainly the teenagers who were getting into the attention of the society. MacInnes observed the cultural and social changes in his country. Originally being a journalist, he managed to give his books a realistic spirit with an emphasis on detail, psychologically believable characters and apparent indignation over discrimination and hypocrisy of the society – in a similar way that his contemporaries belonging to the Angry Young Men group, John Wain or Kingsley Amis, did.[61]

Colin MacInnes took his inspiration from the European avant-garde novels, therefore he experimented with different types of narration or dividing the plot into several episodic fragments. After the success of his *London Trilogy*, MacInnes continued to write for another 15 years, also focusing on non-fiction – together with a book-long paper on his bisexuality to which he, in the time when heterosexuality was still the only legally permitted sexual orientation, openly confessed. From his newer novels, *Three Years To Play* (1970), a novel describing a theatrical world of Shakespearean London through eyes of yet another teenager, is worth mentioning.[62]

Collin MacInnes died of lung cancer on 22nd April 1976.[63] Even though he is sometimes considered as an overlooked author, his novels, as Dewey mentioned, were a combination of "an angry Swiftian sense of social protest with a humane compassion for character and a trenchant sense of humor"[64] and with them he managed to provide a realistic description of the period of social revolution in post-war Britain.

2.2. The London Trilogy

As previously mentioned, Colin MacInnes' mostly celebrated publication is the *London Trilogy*. The series consists of three books that are all unrelated in the regard of the plot,

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[61] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.
[62] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.
[63] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.
[64] Dewey, Colin MacInnes.

however, they are about similar topics – the world of London subcultures, immigrants, teenagers and social revolution. Colin MacInnes aimed this series to represent the voices of people coming from the targeted subcultures and groups and lend them the space they lacked in the mainstream media.

The first book, *City of Spades*, centres around the black culture in London in 1957 and takes the readers to then pubs and dance halls, providing them with an alternative mapping of London. The protagonist, an African immigrant Johnny, arrives in London with big expectations of its riches and the modern world he thought it represents. However, he is disappointed when encountering the native Londoners who are confused and often in disapproval of the changes the immigration wave has on their home. Johnny eventually leaves the city in disgrace, abandoning his English lover and their child. However, the book is a chronicle of the crucial time in the city's history as it describes the breaking point when the first immigration waves started to approach and turn London into the multicultural city it has become.[65]

The second book of the trilogy, *Absolute Beginners*, centres around the teenage subcultures of London in the late 1950s. As mentioned in the previous chapters, it offers an overview of the city underworld. It does not focus on only one subculture but it describes different groups of people and provides the reader with the basics of each, including their style and beliefs, for which it was chosen for the purposes of this thesis.

The last book of the London Trilogy titled *Mr Love and Justice* provides an insight into the lives of its two protagonists in alternating sections with a third-person narrator. Their private and public lives increasingly mirror one another as Mr Justice is a corrupt police officer with an inclination to violence and illegal behaviour and Mr Love is adjusting to his new profession as a ponce ran on strictly fair principles.[66]

London Trilogy as a whole offers a complete and not mainstream look at what the life in 1950s London might have meant. With its authenticity, achieved because of the psychologically believable characters and well-described atmosphere of the city, it provides the reader with an overview of the underworld and the opinions of the people who were not often represented in the mainstream media of the time. As it is the second

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[65] Houlden, Colin MacInnes: 'City of Spades'. London Fictions.
[66] Wiseman, Colin MacInnes: 'Mr Love and Justice'.

book of the trilogy that offers the most complex overview, it has been chosen for the purposes of this thesis and it is analysed further in the following chapters.

2.3. Absolute Beginners

The second published novel of Colin MacInnes' *London Trilogy* centres around the teenage world of 1958 London. The book is essentially a guide to all the different subcultures present in the city and to minds of their followers as well as to the immigrant cultures being brought by the immigration wave from the British colonies. It also provides the reader with the contemporary problems and anxieties of British society, the crisis of "Englishness" and the differences between the adults and teenagers. MacInnes uses the title "absolute beginners" to name the teenagers who are not old enough to have any experiences of the "real" world, however, they have countless possibilities in the post-war time and fewer responsibilities.

2.3.1. Narrative form

While reading the novels of Colin MacInnes, his journalist background is rather obvious. The form the author uses for his book *Absolute Beginners* sometimes looks as if it was a newspaper report on the world of youth subcultures of 1950s London. That is mainly because of the long descriptions of places, people, their behaviour and backgrounds at the expense of a rich plot that would be more typical for a novel. MacInnes chose a first-person narrator to guide the reader through the summer of 1958 London. The narrator, that comes directly from the world of youth subcultures and is, therefore, a part of it, provides the portrayal through his everyday experiences and encounters with members of different cultural groups. Even though the narrator, who is also the protagonist of the novel, is fictional, MacInnes managed to create a very authentic character. Even though the author was not included in the lists of most important British authors of the time and his work is widely overlooked, he is certainly one of the writers to provide readers with the insight to the restless London of the 1950s.

According to Nick Bentley, MacInnes' motivation for writing the *London Trilogy* lies in the aim to give space to those whose voices were not really represented in the mass media of the time and were often misinterpreted by the society – especially the youth subcultures and the culture of immigrants. MacInnes, therefore, attempts to fill the gap in the

contemporary media and literature which concerns these alternative styles. [67] This is achieved by choosing a narrator that is a part of the targeted subcultures – in *Absolute Beginners*, it is namely an English teenager without a name who is essentially a guide to walk the readers through the London subcultures and provide them with their description, motivations, ideals and beliefs.

When considering the language of the novel, MacInnes provides the protagonist with the teenage slang that is unknown to the mainstream public, however, such slang proves to add the authenticity of the novel. As Hebdige claims in *The Meaning of Style*, the language of the subculture is its integral part.[68] The way the narrator talks is, according to Bentley, a representation of the subculture's function to distance itself from the adult mainstream.[69] We can observe this when the protagonist argues with his mother:

> 'You made us minors with your parliamentary what sits,' I told her
> patiently. 'You thought, "That'll keep the little bastards in their
> places, no legal rights, and so on," and you made us minors. Righty-o.
> That also freed us from responsibility, didn't it? […] And then came
> the gay-time boom and all the spending money and suddenly you
> oldos found that though we minors had no rights, we'd got the money
> power. In other words – and listen to me, Ma […], you gave us the
> money, and you took away our responsibility.'[70]

The protagonist uses words such as "righty-o" or "oldos" to distance himself from his mother and her ideals. If he did not want to contrast his points, he could use the Standard English but he wants to show her he is different to her – not only in his opinions but also in the language he uses. Even though some of the words used in the novels might not be comprehensible to the reader, MacInnes took it to his consideration and always provided the reader with the context that would make the meaning of the word clear.

After the book was published, it was often compared to Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) which was a novel dealing with a similar topic – teenage cultures and their world – only in American background. According to Bentley, this leaves space for a discussion about the American influence on British culture of the 1950s and especially for debates

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[67] Bentley, Translating English: youth, race and nation in Colin MacInnes's City of Spades and Absolute Beginners, s. 150.
[68] Hebdige, *The Meaning of Style*, s. 102.
[69] Bentley, Translating English: youth, race and nation in Colin MacInnes's City of Spades and Absolute Beginners, s. 152.
[70] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 51.

about the role of subcultures in the process of the change in the post-war society.[71] Bentley adds the narrator in *Absolute Beginners* uses a working-class slang combined with the American youth idiom – which is similar to slang the American beat writers used[72] – as we can observe in the following passage:

> […] and I swore by Elvis and all the saints that the last teenage year
> of mine was going to be a real rave. Yes, man, come whatever, this
> last year of teenage dream I was out for kicks and fantasy.[73]

The words such as "rave", "teenage" or "kicks" come from the slang of the 1950s American youth culture[74] and are therefore a proof of the Americanization of British culture. Bentley adds that the novel is addressed to British society and is essentially about British culture, however, this is presented through the American form.[75]

When the protagonist encounters members of different subcultures, MacInnes gives those characters their own language – corresponding to the subculture they belong to – to illustrate some aspect of the subculture even on the linguistic level. For example, when the protagonist meets "Ed the Ted", a member of the Ted subculture which the protagonist, being a mod himself, despises, the Ted style of speech is also presented:

> 'You herd, Ed. You've been expelled from the Ted college?'
> 'Naher! Me? Espel me? Wot? Lissen! Me, Ar left them, see? You fink
> I'm sof, or sumfink?' I shook my head at the poor goof and his
> abracadabra.[76]

The despise the protagonist has towards "Ed the Ted" is apparent from the word "abracadabra" the protagonist uses to unflatteringly name his speech.

To summarize, the style Colin MacInnes uses to narrate the novel gives it more authenticity. The language is used very carefully to provide the true slang of British teenagers and other groups, it is, however, still understandable by the mainstream reader.

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[71] Bentley, Translating English: youth, race and nation in Colin MacInnes's City of Spades and Absolute Beginners, s. 154.
[72] Bentley, Translating English: youth, race and nation in Colin MacInnes's City of Spades and Absolute Beginners, s. 155.
[73] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 12.
[74] Bentley, Translating English: youth, race and nation in Colin MacInnes's City of Spades and Absolute Beginners, s. 155.
[75] Bentley, Translating English: youth, race and nation in Colin MacInnes's City of Spades and Absolute Beginners, s.156.
[76] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 57.

2.3.2.   The Protagonist

As previously mentioned, the protagonist of the novel is a British teenage boy who engages in the subcultural world of 1958 London. He is not given a name in the book, though he is sometimes given nicknames when talking to different people. He observes the world of 1958 London through the lens of his trusted Rolleiflex as a professional photographer. Although he does not tell it himself, from his style and his opinions, it is apparent that he belongs to the mod subculture – he rides his trusted Vespa, dresses in an Italian suit and loves modern jazz music and the lifestyle of the jazz community.

The protagonist and his beliefs are also a symbol of the crisis of "Englishness" in British society. He himself is partly proud of being English, he is proud of the tradition that defines "Englishness" but on the other hand the protagonist realises the crisis that the society is undergoing – whether it is because of the rebuilding of the post-war world (both physical and mental), the gradual collapse of the British Empire or because of the immigration wave that is reaching the country. This can be seen in the conversation the protagonist has with Mr Podoroso, a South American diplomat, who is trying to learn something about the British society for, as he states, he has been observing it for weeks. However, the protagonist is not interested in the subjects that interest Mr Podoroso the most and he finishes the conversation by summarising the state of the country and the society in one sentence.

> 'So, you've not much to tell me of Britain and her position.'
> 'Only, I said 'that her position is that she hasn't found her position.'[77]

In other passages the protagonist presents his opinion of the necessary change British society has to undergo to overcome the crisis – he wants British people to embrace their "Englishness" but at the same time he wants them to redefine what it means by combining the traditional British ideals, customs and beliefs with the new influences that are coming from the United States or the colonies with immigrants.

The protagonist also represents the common opinions of the 1950s teenagers concerning the society and the anachronism of the class system. Teenagers of the time were by the mainstream media presented as the ones who despise the working-classes and consider themselves as belonging to the upper classes of the society when the truth was teenagers were rather not interested in the whole system.

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[77] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 33.

> 'You poor old prehistoric monster,' I exclaimed. 'I do not reject the working-classes, and I do not belong to the upper-classes, for one and the same simple reason, namely, that neither of them interests me in the slightest, never have done, never will do. […] I'm just not interested in the whole class crap that seems to needle you and all the taxpayers – needle you all, whichever side of the tracks you live on, or suppose you do.'
> He glared at me. I could see that, if once he believed that what I said I really meant, and thousands of the kiddos did the same as well, the bottom would fall out of his horrid little world.[78]

In this passage, the protagonist argues with his stepbrother who does not belong to the teenage community of the 1950s London and lives a rather traditional life, being a part of the working class. That also signifies that not all the young people of the period believed in the same ideals, some of them felt rather comfortable in the traditional social system and despised the teenage movement.

The protagonist is also aware of the Americanization of British culture. However, he does not want to imitate the Americans and wants British teenagers to create their own version of the youth movements. He does not despise the American influences, on the contrary, but even though he has some reservations concerning British society, he cannot deny his patriotism and pride in being English.

> 'Because I want English kids to be English kids, not West Ken Yanks and bogus imitation Americans, that doesn't mean I'm anti the whole US thing. On the contrary, I'm starting up an anti-anti-American movement, because I just despise the hatred and jealousy of Yanks there is around, and think it's a sure sign of defeat and weakness.'
> […] 'The thing is,' I said, 'to support the local product. America launched the teenage movement, there's no denying, and Frankie S., after all, was, in his way, the very first teenager. But we've got to produce our own variety, and not imitate the Americans – or the Ruskis, or anybody, for that matter.'[79]

Even though the protagonist believes that the teenagers are essentially the same all over the world – they share their beliefs, motivation, desire for freedom – he is also aware of the differences that arise since teenagers come from different cultural backgrounds and he wants them to embrace those differences. He himself has never been to a different country, therefore he builds this opinion on observation of different cultures of immigrants in London and the fact that youth and its revolutionising spirit is a

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[78] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 49.
[79] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 71.

phenomenon that has to be international – which is apparent from the conversation about teenagers he has with Mr Pondoroso:

> '[…] You don't have to travel to know what it's like to be young, any time, anywhere. Believe me, Mr Pondoroso, youth is international, just like old age is. […]'[80]

As the book is essentially a guide to 1950s London, the reader is provided not only with the insight into several subcultures and different types of teenagers but also with the geographical tour of the city and its quarters. The protagonist delivers very colourful descriptions of the London quarters and their atmosphere, especially those in the West End which are then complemented with the protagonist's feelings toward them. In several passages he addresses London as a whole, expresses his warm feelings towards the city and celebrates its youthful and revolutionary spirit – as we can read in the abstract from the evening taxi ride around London city centre:

> […] I thought how, my God, I love this city, horrible though it may be, and never ever want to leave it, come what it may send me. Because though it seems so untidy, and so casual, and so keep-your-distance-from-me, if you can get to know this city well enough to twist it around your finger, and if you're its son, it's always on your side, supporting you – or that's what I imagined.[81]

The protagonist fully recognizes the problems of the city. He knows about the gang fights in the streets, the hatred of the Teds against the immigrants and other problems of the city but still acknowledges the unique atmosphere which could not be found anywhere else in the world. The protagonist lives in Napoli, a quarter of West London which is an area where mostly immigrants, teenagers of different subcultures – but mostly teds – prostitutes and pimps live. Nevertheless, it is the atmosphere that made the protagonist choose this district to live in. As he himself explains:

> […] however horrible the area is, you're free here! No one, I repeat it, no one, has ever asked me there what I am, or what I do, or where I came from, or what my social group is, or whether I'm educated or not, and if there's one thing I cannot tolerate in this world, it's nosey questions.[82]

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[80] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 31.
[81] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 111-112.
[82] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 64.

To conclude, the protagonist is a perfect example of a British teenager in 1958. For he himself is a part of a youth subculture, he provides his own experiences and an insight into the revolutionising youth society of post-war Britain.

2.3.3. Youth Subcultures

As it was already stated in the previous chapters, *Absolute Beginners* is essentially a guide to the youth subcultures in the 1958 London. The narrator – also being a protagonist – walks the readers around different city quarters, bars, jazz clubs and neighbourhoods providing them with the descriptions of style, manners, beliefs and motives of different groups.

When the protagonist gives the description of the mod style, he contrasts it against the trad style – a "trad" stands for a devotee of traditional jazz and style – which he finds unelegant, messy and unattractive.

> Take first the Misery Kid and his trad. Drag. Long, brush-less hair, white stiff-starched collar […], striped shirt, tie of all one colour […], short jacket but an old one […], very, very, tight, tight, trousers with wide stripe, no sox, short boots. Now observe the Dean in the modernist number's version. College-boy smooth crop hair with burnt-in parting, neat white Italian rounded-collared shirt, short Roman jacket very tailored […], no-turn-up narrow trousers with 17-inch bottoms absolute maximum, pointed-toe shoes, and a white mac lying folded by his side, compared with Misery's sausage-rolled umbrella.[83]

However, the protagonist does not stop with the description of the jazz community's style of clothing – in several passages, he provides the reader with the explanation why jazz is so important to him and to the British teenagers, as we can see in the following extract:

> […] jazz is a thing so wonderful that if anybody doesn't rave about it, all you can feel for them is pity […]. But the great thing about the jazz world, and all the kids that enter into it, is that no one, not a soul, cares what your class is, or what your race is, or what your income, or if you're boy, or girl, or bent, or versatile, or what you are – so long as you dig the scene and can behave yourself, and have left all that crap behind you, too, when you come in the jazz club door.[84]

or:

> […] and as I listened to the sweet and soothing sound I once again reflected, thank the Lord I was born into the jazz age, what on earth

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[83] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 85.
[84] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 83.

> could it have been when all they had to listen to was ballad tunes and waltzes? Because jazz music is a thing that, as few things do, makes you feel really at home in the world here, as if it's an okay notion to be born a human animal, or so.[85]

The protagonist states that a person can have any kind of social or cultural background to be a part of the jazz community as long as he treats other members politely and with the same respect he expects to be treated with. That is also why the mods rejected the contemporary anxieties concerning the immigration wave. Of course, they knew about the issues it brought – the problem with unemployment or prostitutes – however, they did not judge a person for his colour of skin or the country he comes from.

When it comes to addressing the Teddy boys, the novel is rather harsh to this subculture – for the protagonist is a mod himself. The description of "Ed the Ted" that is provided is very unflattering, labelling him as a stupid individual not being able to produce a more complicated sentence or a thought – that is also shown in the way his speech is written – as mentioned in the chapter "Narrative Forms".

Youth subcultures are not the only social groups that are mentioned in the book. The protagonist pays big attention to the homosexual community as he himself is surrounded by a few gays and lesbians – whether it is his neighbour nicknamed Big Jill or his friend and also a neighbour who the protagonist refers to as Fabulous Hoplite. The topic of homosexuality was important to the author for he himself has openly declared his bisexuality to the public. In several passages, the problem of homosexuality being still against the British law is opened but the issue is summarized with the speech of Fabulous Hoplite:

> '[…] But all I would ask is this, please: is there any other law in England that's broken every night by thousands of lucky individuals throughout the British Isles, without anything being done about it? I mean, if the law knew that thousands of crimes of any other kind whatever were to be committed by persons of whom they know the names and addresses and etcetera, wouldn't they take violent action? But in our case, although they know perfectly well what's happening – who doesn't, after all? It's all so notorious, and such a bore – except the sordid happenings in parks, and the classical choir-boy manoeuvre that every self-respecting bitch most cordially disapproves of, they ignore the law they're paid to enforce every bit as much as we do.'[86]

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[85] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 98-99.
[86] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 158-159.

Fabulous Hoplite states that even though homosexuality is illegal, everyone knows it exists in society, even the authorities. Therefore, everyone would profit if the law was repealed and homosexuality became legal.

Throughout the whole book, only a few characters are given their real name. Those are mainly the adults who the protagonist encounters – e.g. Mr Podoroso or Vendice Partners. Characters that come from the teenage world are given nicknames which essentially serve as short definitions of the particular person – e.g. Fabulous Hoplite being a homosexual and a model or "Ed the Ted" belonging to the Ted subculture. The nicknames are not always invented by the protagonist, they are used by everyone, which gives the characters a certain amount of anonymity.

2.3.4. Generation differences

Even though the book is mainly about the teenagers of the 1950s, it leaves space to the older generation to present their opinions and ideals. Those are then contrasted with the protagonist's points of view.

The older generation is mainly represented by the mother and father of the protagonist, who both are completely different characters to each other. The father of the protagonist is a perfect example of a man that lives in the past and was emotionally destroyed by the war. He spends most of his time in his room, writing a history book about the pre-war period. Even though he welcomes the post-war period and the youthful and happy spirit it brought, he cannot escape the gloom of the past and mentally stays in it. The protagonist thinks of his father's fate as a tragedy for he is not able to enjoy life anymore and is essentially only surviving. The father of the protagonist feels his life to be over, even though he is still in his middle age – as can be seen in the following extract:

> 'I should have had my youth in the 1950s, like you have, and not my middle age.'[87]

He is apparently envious of the protagonist having the freedom and little responsibilities he did not have when he was young. However, when the protagonist asks him why he does not find a workplace and leave the house, the father is only silent. The reason then is summarised by the half-brother of the protagonist:

> 'Why do you stay in this dump, for instance?' I said to him.
> 'You mean here with your mother?'

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[87] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 46.

      'Yes, Dad. Why?'
      'He stays because he's afraid to leave, and she keeps him because she
      wants the place to look respectable.'[88]

The father is afraid of the new world still evolving while he sits in his room and feels that the world has no place for him anymore. On the other hand, the mother of the protagonist represents another way of adapting to the post-war world as she centres her life around her lust for money. She earns the money by renting rooms in the house to immigrants making the place occupied by strangers. She was essentially the reason why the protagonist left the house and moved elsewhere for their interaction always ended with an argument. The mother stands against the teenage movement happening in the country, feeling that such young people should not possess greater amounts of money for they are still not experienced enough by the real world. She thinks of the teenagers as they are inferior to the adults – as we can observe in the extract:

      'All that money,' she said, looking at me as if I had pound notes
      falling out of my ears, and she could snatch them, 'and you're only
      minors! With no responsibilities to need all that money for.'[89]

The mother of the protagonist, in contrast with her husband, has not accepted the fact the teenagers in the 1950s became an important part of the society and they have more opportunities and fewer responsibilities than the adults ever had. She does not consider it to be beneficial for society and possibly regards the whole social revolution as a bad progression. However, she welcomes the immigration wave as she can collect money from the immigrants who come to rent a room from her.

An interesting point to observe is the relationship of the protagonist towards children. Even though he considers himself to have modern opinions about the world and society, his relationship towards children is rather similar to the relationship his mother has towards teenagers.

      Now myself, I've nothing against kids, I realise that they have to be so
      that the race can continue, but I can't say that I like them, or approve
      of them. In fact, I mistrust them, and consider they're a menace,
      because they're so damned wilful and energetic, and […] they know
      perfectly well what they're up to, and see they get it, and one day,
      mark my words, we'll wake up and find the little horrors have risen in

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[88] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 46.
[89] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 51.

the night and captured the Bank of England and Buckingham Palace
and the BBC.[90]

In summary, the book also represents the social situation in the United Kingdom and is an example of the generation gap standing between teenagers and the generation of their parents. The book provides symbols of adults who welcome the social revolution but are rather anxious about it – the father of the protagonist – and those who do not approve of it and feel the teenagers should not be given such big amounts of money and opportunity – the mother of the protagonist.

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[90] MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*, s. 59.

Conclusion

The rise of the youth subcultures appearing in Great Britain in the post-war period was caused by the baby boom happening after the end of the Second World War. The baby boom was a result of the relief the British society felt when eventually finding itself in a peaceful country. The fact the country became a welfare state gave the society even more security. The children born in this baby boom became teenagers by the late 1950s and 1960 and started to take their place in society. With the more opportunities and fewer responsibilities, teenagers had more freedom than their parents ever had. Therefore, they were able to earn more money which they used for buying music records, stylish clothes or musical instruments. This then led to the forming of different subcultures, namely the teds, the mods, the skinheads or the rockers.

The novel *Absolute Beginners* by Colin MacInnes is an overview of the British youth subculture of the end of the 1950s and it provides an authentic portrayal of the London underworld. The book was meant to give a voice to the teenagers and social groups which were not provided much space to represent themselves in the contemporary mainstream media.

The literary analysis showed the authenticity of the novel which was achieved by its psychologically believable characters, well-chosen narrative forms or the colourful descriptions of the youth subcultures, London areas and the atmosphere of the moment. One of the strongest features of the novel is its protagonist who himself is a part of a youth subculture and whose function is to guide the reader through the London summer of 1958. Through his eyes, the reader can observe interactions with different people belonging to different subcultures and social groups. Generation issues that appear in the book are also described through the analysis of the protagonist's parents.

Overall, the novel *Absolute Beginners* successfully reflects the atmosphere of the late 1950s in Great Britain and it provides a guide to restless London. Even though the opinions of the protagonist – who is involved in the teenage movement and welcomes the changes in society – are presented, the book does not depict only the positive side of the social revolution but it also deals with the issues of the immigration, the generation gap or the fights between the different subcultures which were typical for the time.

Résumé

Závěrečná práce je zaměřena na subkultury mladých ve Velké Británii v 50. a 60. letech 20. století v kontextu románu Colina MacInnese *Absolute Beginners* (1959). V teoretické části jsou rozvinuty důvody, které vedly ke vzniku těchto subkultur. Nejdůležitější subkultury, které se na území objevovaly, jsou posléze popsány. V praktické části je analyzována kniha *Absolute Beginners* se zaměřením na tyto subkultury. Značná část praktické části je věnována analýze vypravěčských metod, které autor používal, a postavě vypravěče/hlavního hrdiny, který symbolizuje mladou generaci tehdejší Velké Británie.

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Annotation

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Název v angličtině	Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* in the Context of the British Youth Subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s
Anotace práce	Bakalářská práce je zaměřena zobrazení subkultur mládeže v románu *Absolute Beginners* od Colina MacInnese. Cílem teoretické části je tyto britské subkultury 50. a 60. let 20. století popsat a zároveň objasnit důvody, proč tyto subkultury vznikaly. Hlavním cílem praktické části je posléze analyzovat román *Absolute Beginners* právě v kontextu těchto subkultur mladých a sociálních změn v britské společnosti, kterými se román také zabývá.
Klíčová slova	Subkultury, mods, teds, skinheadi, rockeři, společnost, teenageři, Colin MacInnes
Anotace v angličtině	This thesis focuses on the portrayal of British youth subcultures in the novel *Absolute Beginners* written by Colin MacInnes. The goal of the theoretical part is to define these subcultures and describe the reasons behind their origin. The main goal of the practical part is then to analyse the novel *Absolute Beginners* in the context of these subcultures and the social changes in British society which are also dealt with in the novel.
Klíčová slova v angličtině	Subcultures, mods, teds, skinheads, rockers, society, teenagers, Colin MacInnes
Přílohy vázané v práci	CD
Rozsah práce	
Jazyk práce	Anglický jazyk