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Reflecting 1960s–1970s New York Society in Patti Smith's *Just Kids*: A Sociology of Literature Perspective

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Abstract. This study examines how Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* (2010) reflects the social conditions of New York City during the 1960s and 1970s, a period characterized by the tension between conventional social values and the emergence of bohemian culture. Previous studies have primarily focused on the memoir's autobiographical aspects, artistic collaboration, identity, and trauma, while comparatively little attention has been given to its portrayal of the broader social realities of the era. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the memoir through Alan Swingewood's sociology of literature, which views literary works as reflections of the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which they are produced. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the study collected textual data through close reading, classified the data into thematic categories, and interpreted them in relation to the historical context of 1960s–1970s New York. The findings reveal that *Just Kids* portrays a society shaped by traditional expectations surrounding sexuality, marriage, religion, and family, while also depicting economic hardship, housing insecurity, and low-wage employment experienced by emerging artists. The memoir further reflects the impact of major historical events, including the Vietnam War, the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, and the attempted assassination of Andy Warhol, demonstrating how these events influenced both collective consciousness and individual lives. Overall, the findings confirm that *Just Kids* functions not only as a personal memoir but also as a social document that captures the complexities of New York society during a period of cultural transformation and the emergence of bohemian culture as an alternative way of life.

Keywords: Bohemian culture, *Just Kids*, New York society, sociology of literature

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been recognized as a reflection of society because it records social values, historical events, cultural practices, and human experiences within particular periods (Ahmadi, 2021). Rather than functioning solely as an aesthetic work, literary texts also serve as cultural documents that reveal the relationships between individuals and the social environment in which they live (Meirysa & Wardarita, 2021). According to Ahmadi (2021), literature reflects the social realities, conflicts, and transformations of a particular historical period, enabling readers to understand society through literary

representation. This perspective is particularly relevant to memoirs because they combine personal experience with broader historical and cultural realities

One literary work that vividly reflects a particular social and cultural environment is *Just Kids* (2010) by Patti Smith. The memoir recounts Smith's relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe while documenting the artistic and social atmosphere of New York City during the late 1960s and 1970s. Rather than presenting only personal memories, *Just Kids* portrays a society experiencing significant cultural transformation characterized by conventional social expectations, economic instability, artistic experimentation, and the emergence of alternative communities. During this period, New York became a center of countercultural movements where young artists, musicians, writers, and creative communities negotiated new ways of living outside mainstream American values.

The social conditions of New York during the 1960s–1970s have attracted considerable scholarly attention because the period represented a transition from postwar social conformity toward greater cultural diversity and artistic freedom. Traditional expectations regarding employment, family, gender roles, and economic success increasingly encountered resistance from emerging artistic communities that promoted creativity, individual expression, and alternative lifestyles. Consequently, examining literary representations of this period contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between literature, history, and society.

Several previous studies have examined *Just Kids* and related literary works from various perspectives. Previous research has primarily focused on autobiographical writing, identity formation, artistic collaboration, feminism, memory, and cultural identity. Other studies have investigated rebellion, trauma, class conflict, and psychological experiences through different literary approaches. Although these studies provide valuable insights into literary representation and individual experience, they pay relatively little attention to how *Just Kids* represents the broader social conditions of New York City during the cultural transformation of the 1960s–1970s. Likewise, studies employing the sociology of literature to examine the memoir as a reflection of its historical and social context remain limited.

This limitation reveals a research gap. Existing scholarship generally emphasizes personal identity, artistic development, or psychological dimensions of the memoir, while the representation of New York society as the social background that shapes the narrative has received comparatively little attention. As a result, the relationship between the memoir and the historical realities of American society during the late 1960s and 1970s has not been fully explored from the perspective of the sociology of literature.

To address this gap, the present study employs Swingewood (1972) sociology of literature, particularly his concept of literature as a reflection of society. This theoretical perspective enables literary texts to be interpreted in relation to the historical, cultural, and social conditions that shape their production. Through this framework, the memoir is examined not merely as a personal narrative but also as a representation of New York society during a period marked by social change, economic challenges, shifting cultural values, and the growth of artistic communities.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how Patti Smith portrays New York society during the 1960s–1970s in *Just Kids*. It is expected that the findings will demonstrate that the memoir functions not only as an autobiographical account but also as a literary representation of a society undergoing profound cultural transformation. Furthermore, this study is expected to contribute to the sociology of literature by expanding scholarly discussions on the relationship between literary texts and the social realities they represent, particularly within the context of American literary and cultural studies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. :2024) examine the portrayal of New York society during the 1960s–1970s in Patti Smith's *Just Kids*. A sociology of literature approach, based on Alan Swingewood's concept of literature as a reflection of society, was used to interpret the relationship between the memoir and the historical, social, and cultural conditions of its period. This approach was selected because it enables literary texts to be analyzed as representations of social realities rather than solely as aesthetic works.

The primary data source was Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* (HarperCollins, 2010). The data consisted of narrations, dialogues, character descriptions, and events portraying the social conditions of New York City during the 1960s–1970s, including social norms, economic conditions, artistic communities, and cultural transformation. The researcher served as the primary research instrument by identifying, selecting, classifying, and interpreting textual data relevant to the research objective.

Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. The memoir was read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its content, after which passages related to the representation of New York society were identified and categorized according to recurring social themes.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative textual analysis. First, the selected passages were classified into thematic categories representing major aspects of New York society. Second, each category was interpreted using Swingewood's sociology of literature to examine how the memoir reflects the historical and social realities of the period. Finally, the findings were interpreted to explain how *Just Kids* represents New York society during the cultural transformation of the 1960s–1970s. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data interpretation was conducted consistently by comparing textual evidence with the memoir's historical and social context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Conventional Social Values and Moral Expectations

Just Kids portrays American society during the 1960s as one strongly influenced by traditional moral values, religious beliefs, and family expectations. Through Patti Smith's autobiographical experiences, the memoir reflects how dominant social norms regulated sexuality, marriage, and individual behavior. Consistent with Swingewood's (1986) view

that literature functions as a reflection of society, these personal narratives reveal broader social attitudes toward gender and morality in postwar America.

One of the clearest examples appears in Smith's recollection of her teenage pregnancy, which she describes as having "fallen into trouble" (Smith, 2010 :15–16). Rather than presenting pregnancy merely as a personal experience, the memoir illustrates how premarital pregnancy was socially constructed as a moral transgression. This perception extended beyond the individual, as Smith recalls that her family was treated "as if they were harboring a criminal" (Smith, 2010 :16). Such reactions demonstrate how communities exercised informal social control through judgment and collective shame, reinforcing accepted standards of femininity and family life.

The memoir further reveals that these values were institutionalized within professional settings. Smith remembers receiving harsh treatment from nurses because of her unmarried status during childbirth (Smith, 2010 :17). This episode suggests that healthcare institutions were influenced by prevailing moral ideologies rather than operating as socially neutral spaces. In this sense, *Just Kids* documents not only individual discrimination but also the broader cultural assumptions embedded within American social institutions.

Religious expectations likewise shaped personal decisions. Robert Mapplethorpe's reluctance to tell his parents that he and Smith were living together before marriage reflects the continuing influence of Catholic values on family life (Smith, 2010 :55). His fear of disappointing his family illustrates the tension between traditional religious expectations and the increasingly alternative lifestyles emerging within New York's artistic community.

These representations suggest that *Just Kids* captures a society in transition. Although conventional values continued to regulate everyday life, younger generations increasingly questioned established definitions of morality, family, and personal freedom. Consequently, the memoir reflects both the persistence of traditional social norms and the beginning of cultural change that characterized American society during the late 1960s.

3.2. Economic Hardship and Urban Survival

Besides portraying prevailing social values, *Just Kids* documents the economic realities faced by young artists attempting to build their lives in New York City. The memoir challenges the popular image of New York as a city of limitless opportunity by revealing widespread financial insecurity, unstable housing, and precarious employment. These experiences position the memoir as a reflection of urban social conditions rather than solely a narrative of artistic success.

Smith's arrival in New York immediately exposes these economic realities. She recalls sleeping in Central Park after receiving little assistance from others and wandering through the city with only a few belongings (Smith, 2010 :22–23). Her experience illustrates the vulnerability of young migrants who were drawn to New York by cultural aspirations yet confronted material deprivation upon arrival.

Financial insecurity permeates everyday life throughout the memoir. Smith's recollection that "fifty cents was real money in 1967" (Smith, 2010 :24) highlights how even the smallest amount of money became meaningful under conditions of poverty. Similarly, she describes working long hours for very low wages (Smith, 2010 :42), while both she and Mapplethorpe relied on temporary work, including busking and manual labor, to survive (Smith, 2010 :68–71). These experiences reveal that artistic ambition often depended upon unstable forms of employment rather than financial security.

Housing also emerges as a recurring social problem. Smith repeatedly describes difficulties paying rent and notes that many residents were being evicted (Smith, 2010 :159). By extending these observations beyond her own circumstances, the memoir portrays housing insecurity as a widespread urban issue affecting many members of New York society during this period.

Interestingly, economic hardship is consistently juxtaposed with creative possibility. Despite financial limitations, New York remained a place where artistic identity could flourish. This coexistence of poverty and creativity reflects one of the defining social characteristics of the city's cultural environment during the late 1960s. Through Swingewood's perspective, these experiences demonstrate that *Just Kids* documents the material conditions underpinning the development of New York's artistic community.

3.3. Social and Political Changes

Besides reflecting moral values and economic realities, Just Kids also portrays the social and political transformations that shaped American society during the late 1960s. The memoir situates Patti Smith's personal experiences within a broader historical context marked by the Vietnam War, political unrest, and national tragedies. Rather than functioning merely as historical references, these events illustrate how political circumstances influenced everyday life and the perspectives of young Americans. From the perspective of Swingewood's sociology of literature, such representations demonstrate that literary works preserve the social atmosphere of the period in which they are produced.

One of the most significant historical events reflected in the memoir is the Vietnam War. Smith recalls that the ongoing conflict made her artistic efforts feel insignificant, stating that "the Vietnam War made my efforts seem meaningless" (Smith, 2010 :54). This statement illustrates that the war affected not only political institutions but also the emotional lives of ordinary citizens. Although Smith did not directly participate in political activism, the conflict generated uncertainty and anxiety that influenced her understanding of both art and society. The memoir therefore portrays the Vietnam War as part of the collective experience of American society rather than a distant political event.

Smith's response to political change also reflects the diversity of attitudes among the younger generation. She admits that she "could not identify with political movements" (Smith, 2010 :54), suggesting that social engagement was not always expressed through organized activism. Instead, many artists responded to contemporary issues through literature, music, photography, and other forms of cultural production. This finding

supports the view that artistic expression became an alternative means of interpreting and responding to social transformation during the period.

The memoir further records several national events that profoundly shaped public consciousness. Among them are the attempted assassination of Andy Warhol and the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 (Smith, 2010 :57–58). Smith presents these events not simply as historical milestones but as deeply personal memories that altered her perception of the future. She recalls believing that "everything would be all right" moments before witnessing Kennedy's assassination on television (Smith, 2010 :58). The sudden shift from hope to despair reflects the widespread uncertainty experienced by American society as political violence became increasingly common.

This relationship between public events and personal experience is further emphasized when Smith reflects that "the world outside was unraveling, and, increasingly, my own world as well" (Smith, 2010 :57). The memoir suggests that historical events cannot be separated from individual lives because social instability inevitably shapes personal emotions, aspirations, and everyday experiences. In this regard, Just Kids demonstrates that personal memory is inseparable from the historical conditions surrounding it.

Unlike previous studies that primarily examine Just Kids as an autobiographical narrative or an exploration of artistic identity, the present study demonstrates that the memoir also reflects the political climate of the United States during the late 1960s. Through references to war, political conflict, and national tragedy, the memoir documents the collective uncertainties experienced by American society while simultaneously recording the emotional responses of individuals living through these historical transformations. Consequently, Just Kids functions not only as a memoir but also as a literary reflection of one of the most turbulent periods in modern American history.

3.4. Urban Culture and Artistic Environment

Another important aspect reflected in Just Kids is the cultural environment of New York City, which emerged as one of the most influential artistic centers during the late 1960s and 1970s. Throughout the memoir, New York is portrayed not merely as a physical setting but as a social space where artists, musicians, writers, photographers, and intellectuals interacted and developed alternative forms of creativity. In accordance with Swingewood's sociology of literature, these representations illustrate how literature captures the cultural characteristics of a particular society and historical period.

The memoir emphasizes that artistic communities were primarily built through informal relationships and shared creative interests. Smith recounts meeting musicians, poets, and visual artists who became central figures in her personal and artistic development (Smith, 2010 :91–97). Rather than relying on formal institutions, these communities developed through friendship, collaboration, and mutual support. Such interactions reveal that New York's artistic environment encouraged collective creativity and provided opportunities for emerging artists despite limited economic resources.

Cultural venues also played an essential role in sustaining artistic life. Smith describes places such as the Scene as gathering spaces where musicians and artists exchanged ideas, performed their work, and established professional networks (Smith, 2010 :114). These

venues functioned as more than entertainment spaces; they became cultural institutions that facilitated the circulation of artistic ideas and contributed to the development of New York's creative identity. Their presence reflects the importance of urban cultural infrastructure in supporting artistic production during this period.

The memoir further portrays New York as a socially diverse environment where individuals from different social backgrounds coexisted within the same cultural sphere. Smith recalls attending exhibitions that brought together artists, collectors, musicians, drag queens, socialites, and other members of the city's creative community (Smith, 2010 :155, 173). Such diversity demonstrates that New York's cultural landscape blurred conventional social boundaries and encouraged interactions across different social groups. These representations reflect the city's openness to cultural experimentation and alternative lifestyles, characteristics that distinguished New York from more socially conservative environments.

In addition to its social diversity, the memoir assigns symbolic meaning to the city's physical landscape. Smith repeatedly associates New York's streets, buildings, and distinctive light with artistic inspiration, suggesting that the urban environment actively shaped the creative identities of those who lived within it (Smith, 2010 :179). The city therefore functions not simply as the backdrop of the narrative but as an active participant in the artistic experiences described throughout the memoir.

Compared with previous studies that focus primarily on Smith's autobiographical writing or artistic collaboration, the present study demonstrates that Just Kids also documents the cultural life of New York as a reflection of its historical context. The memoir portrays how artistic communities, cultural institutions, and urban spaces collectively contributed to the formation of a vibrant creative environment. From the perspective of Swingewood's sociology of literature, these representations confirm that Just Kids serves not only as a personal memoir but also as a social document that records the cultural dynamics of New York during one of its most transformative periods.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Patti Smith's Just Kids functions not only as a personal memoir but also as a literary reflection of New York society during the 1960s and 1970s. Through the perspective of Swingewood's sociology of literature, the memoir reveals how literary works can represent the social, economic, political, and cultural realities of the period in which they are produced. The analysis shows that Smith's personal experiences are closely connected to broader historical conditions, allowing the memoir to document the complexities of American society during a period of significant transformation.

The findings indicate that Just Kids reflects four major aspects of New York society during the late 1960s and 1970s. First, the memoir portrays conventional social norms that regulated sexuality, marriage, religion, and family life through various forms of social expectations and institutional practices. Second, it documents the economic hardship experienced by young artists, including poverty, unstable employment, and housing insecurity, revealing the material realities behind New York's reputation as a

cultural center. Third, the memoir records the influence of major political events, such as the Vietnam War and the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, illustrating how national crises shaped both collective consciousness and individual experience. Finally, it depicts New York as a vibrant cultural environment where artistic communities, creative collaboration, and diverse social interactions contributed to the city's identity as a center of cultural production.

These findings expand previous studies that have primarily examined Just Kids from autobiographical, identity, or artistic perspectives. By focusing on the memoir as a reflection of its social context, this study demonstrates that Just Kids also serves as a social document that records the historical realities of New York during one of the most transformative decades in American history. Therefore, the study reinforces Swingewood's argument that literature not only expresses individual experience but also reflects the social conditions, cultural values, and historical changes of the society.

Future studies may further examine Just Kids by employing other literary or cultural approaches, such as subculture studies, cultural memory, urban studies, or gender studies, to provide broader perspectives on the relationship between literature and society.

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