

Essay on Beat Poetry

Beat poetry was written by a group of American writers who wrote their works after the end of World War II. These writers were inspired by the circumstances created by the World War and went on writing about them in their works, the chief features of the poetry of Beat Generation were “the rejection of received standards, innovations in style, experimentation with drugs, alternative sexualities, an interest in Eastern religion, a rejection of materialism, and explicit portrayals of the human condition.”

The phrase ‘Beat Generation’ was coined by Jack Kerouac ‘to characterize a perceived underground, anti-conformist youth movement in New York.’ The adjective ‘beat’ means ‘tired’ or ‘beaten down’ within the African-American community of the period and had developed out of the image “beat to his socks”, but Kerouac appropriated the image and altered the meaning to include the connotations “upbeat,” “beatific,” and the musical association of being “on the beat”.

The origins of the Beat Generation are found to be in the campus of Columbia University. The followers of this movement are the Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso who opposed the ideology of the mainstream politics and culture. The group of these poets later came to be known as the Beat generation, who were interested in changing consciousness and defying conventional writing. The works of these poets present them as bringing forth their innovative ideas about the current socio-political affairs. This ideology has a close resemblance with ‘poets of the San Francisco Renaissance movement, such as Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan.’

The female contemporaries of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs were intimately involved in the creation of Beat philosophy and literature, and yet remain markedly absent from the mainstream interpretation of the most important aspects and figures of the movement. Further, the Beat writings of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs often portray female characters in flat, traditional gender roles most typical of an ideal 1950s American housewife. Rather than offering liberation from social norms, Beat culture actually often marginalized and further culturally repressed American women and, more specifically, many of the female writers of the time period. Although women are less acknowledged in histories of the first Beat Generation, the omission may be due more to the period’s sexism than the reality. Joan Vollmer for instance did not write, although she appears as a minor figure in multiple authors’ works. She has become legendary as the wife of William S. Burroughs, documented in Kerouac’s novels, and killed by Burroughs in a drunken game of William Tell. Corso and Diane Di Prima, among others, insist that there were female Beats, but that it was more difficult for women to get away with a Bohemian existence in that era.

Some Beat writers were openly gay or bisexual, including two of the most prominent (Ginsberg and Burroughs). Some met each other through gay connections, including David Kammerer’s interest in Lucien Carr.

One of the contentious features of Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* for authorities were lines about homosexual sex. William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* contains content dealing with same-sex relations and pedophilia. Both works were unsuccessfully prosecuted for obscenity. Victory by the publishers helped to curtail literary censorship in the United States.

Considered racy at the time, Kerouac’s writings are now considered mild. *On the Road* mentions Neal Cassady’s bisexuality without comment, while *Visions of Cody* confronts it. However, the first novel does show Cassady as frankly promiscuous. Kerouac’s novels feature an interracial love affair (*The Subterraneans*), and group sex (*The Dharma Bums*). The relationships among men in Kerouac’s novels are predominantly homosexual.

The battle against social conformity and literary tradition was central to the work of the Beats. Among this group of poets, hallucinogenic drugs were used to achieve higher consciousness. These

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drugs include alcohol, marijuana, benzedrine, morphine, peyote yage and LSD. The use of these drugs, they thought, inspired their intellectual interest as well as simplehedonism. Though the actual results of the use of these drugs are difficult to determine, it is claimed that some of these drugs can enhance creativity, insight or productivity. Along with the drugs, these writers also believed that meditation and Eastern religion also inspired their consciousness. From the Eastern religions, Buddhism was important to many of the Beat poets. The poets like Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg intensely studied this religion and it figured into much of their work.

Allen Ginsberg's first book, *Howl and Other Poems*, is often considered representative of the Beat poets. In 1956 Lawrence Ferlinghetti's press *City Lights* published *Howl* and Ferlinghetti was brought to trial the next year on charges of obscenity. In a hugely publicized case, the judge ruled that *Howl* was not obscene and brought national attention to Ginsberg and the Beat poets.

Besides publishing the *Pocket Poets Series*, Ferlinghetti also founded the legendary San Francisco bookstore *City Lights*. Still in operation today, *City Lights* is an important landmark of Beat generation history. Several of the surrounding streets have been renamed after Beat poets as well, commemorating their important contribution to the cultural landscape of San Francisco.

Other Beat poets included Diane di Prima, Neal Cassady, Anne Waldman and Michael McClure. Although William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac are often best remembered for works of fiction such as *Naked Lunch* and *On the Road*, respectively, they also wrote poetry and were very much part of the Beats as well; Kerouac is said to have coined the term "Beat generation," describing the down-and-out status of himself and his peers during the post-war years.

While many authors claim to be directly influenced by the Beats, the Beat Generation phenomenon itself has had a pervasive influence on Western culture more broadly. In 1982, Ginsberg published a summary of "the essential effects" of the Beat Generation.

These are:

- Spiritual liberation, sexual "revolution" or "liberation," i.e., gay liberation, somewhat catalyzing women's liberation, black liberation, Gray Panther activism.
- Liberation of the world from censorship.
- Demystification and/or decriminalization of cannabis and other drugs.
- The evolution of rhythm and blues into rock and roll as a high art form, as evidenced by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and other popular musicians influenced in the later fifties and sixties by Beat generation poets' and writers' works.
- The spread of ecological consciousness, emphasized early on by Gary Snyder and Michael McClure, the notion of a "Fresh Planet."
- Opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization, as emphasized in writings of Burroughs, Huncke, Ginsberg, and Kerouac.
- Attention to what Kerouac called (after Spengler) a "second religiousness" developing within an advanced civilization.
- Return to an appreciation of idiosyncrasy as against state regimentation.
- Respect for land and indigenous peoples and creatures, as proclaimed by Kerouac in his slogan from *On the Road*: "The Earth is an Indian thing."