**“The Beat Generation”**

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In American in the 1950s, a new cultural and literary movement staked its claim on the nation’s consciousness. The Beat Generation was never a large movement in terms of sheer numbers, but in influence and cultural status they were more visible than any other competing aesthetic. The years immediately after the Second World War saw a wholesale reappraisal of the conventional structures of society. Just as the postwar economic boom was taking hold, students in universities were beginning to question the rampant materialism of their society. The Beat Generation was a product of this questioning. They saw runaway capitalism as destructive to the human spirit and antithetical to social equality. In addition to their dissatisfaction with consumer culture, the Beats railed against the stifling prudery of their parents’ generation. The taboos against frank discussions of sexuality were seen as unhealthy and possibly damaging to the psyche. In the world of literature and art, the Beats stood in opposition to the clean, almost antiseptic formalism of the early twentieth century Modernists. They fashioned a literature that was more bold, straightforward, and expressive than anything that had come before. Underground music styles like jazz were especially evocative for Beat writers, while threatening and sinister to the establishment. To many, the artistic productions of the Beats crossed the line into pornography and therefore merited censorship. Some dismissed the Beat Generation’s literature as mere provocation – a means to get attention, not serious art. Time has proven that the cultural impact of the Beat writers was far from short-lived, as the influence of their work continues to be widespread.

The “founders” of the Beat Generation met at Columbia University in the early 1940s. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg formed the core of this initial group, and they would remain bulwarks of the Beat sensibility for years to come. Lucien Carr, John Clellon Holmes, and Neal Cassidy were also original members of this coterie, though their clout was somewhat less than the others. Gregory Corso was a first wave Beat poet who Ginsberg met a bar. For the Beat Generation, the shadowy underside of society could harbor every bit as much creative genius as the gilded halls of the academy. Despite their anti-establishment and anti-academy pretentions, the Beats were all well-educated and generally from middle class backgrounds. It was Kerouac who coined the term “Beat Generation,” and the name stuck. William S. Burroughs was another original Beat writer, though slightly older and more experienced than his contemporaries. Burroughs was found unfit to serve in the Army during World War II, and had spent several years wandering and doing odd jobs. It was pure serendipity that he and Kerouac and Ginsberg would enter each other’s orbit, for their creative interchanges marked the true beginning of Beat literature.

The Beat Generation pulled from a variety of source materials to construct their particular vision of literature and culture. Several of the originators claim Romantic poets as major influences on their work. Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake are often cited as especially influential on the development of the Beat aesthetic. Interspersed with their Romantic influences were surrealist and absurdist tendencies. At the same time, the American Transcendental Movement of the nineteenth century was a powerful inspiration for the confrontational politics of the Beats. Henry David Thoreau was particularly revered as a symbol of protest. It was the Beats, in fact, who played a large role in rehabilitating Thoreau’s reputation and elevating *Walden* to the status that it holds today. Conversely, the artistic production of the American Modernists was in many ways reviled by the Beats. The neo-classical formalism of T. S. Eliot was rejected as too much removed from real life and experience. Eliot embraced his status as an academic, while to the Beat Generation he was simply one more elitist with pretentions of grandeur.

The elder statesman of the Beat Generation was the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. A son of immigrants, Ferlinghetti was a Navy veteran who worked with resistance movements during World War II. He settled in San Francisco after the war, where he opened the City Lights Bookstore. City Lights quickly become a hub of Beat Generation literati. Around the same time, Ferlinghetti also entered the publishing industry, bringing both lesser-known and established poets to the mainstream. In his own poetry, Ferlinghetti displayed a jazz-inspired rhythm and improvisational spirit. Much like the work of e. e. cummings, his lines seemed almost thrown on the page, though underneath the seeming disorganization was careful planning and a deliberate effect. Ferlinghetti was known for his combination of humor and darkness, a perfect reflection of the state of America and the world at mid-century. He saw the decadence and prudery of American culture, and the destructive potential of capitalism gone awry, but his first response was to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Ferlinghetti’s poetry, therefore, is less firmly rooted in the Beat aesthetic from which it sprang. His humor and humanity make his art more timeless, not as weighed down by the historical moment.

The publication of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* in 1956 marks a turning point in the history of Beat literature, not to mention American literature in general. The long-form poem is intended to be read aloud, almost chanted, a sort of return to an oral tradition that had been neglected in literature for a long time. The content of the poem raised eyebrows, and sparked an obscenity trial which challenged the definition of pornography in America. Ginsberg won, and the judgment more or less ensured that poetry and fiction would from then on be immune to the kind of censorship that still plagued other genres of art. With *Howl*, Ginsberg takes the reader/listener on a tour of the underside of America. There are drug-addicts, drifters, prostitutes, and swindlers. There is a visceral rage against the system that requires conformity and selling-out. Foul language and slang are common throughout the work, as well as drug use and criminality. All of these things were shocking to the 1950s establishment. But for Ginsberg, he was simply following the path of his inspiration. He cited Walt Whitman as one of his greatest influences, and one can certainly hear echoes of Whitman’s primitivism throughout Ginsberg’s corpus of work.

As the frantic exuberance of the 1950s gave way to the chaos of the 1960s, Allen Ginsberg moderated his poetics a great deal. His work was always an expression of his inner turmoil and quest for meaning. As his life came more into focus, the energies that fueled a production like *Howl* were no longer there. No one has suggested that Ginsberg lost his edge, but rather that his work became more mature, less explosive. He spent much of his time from the sixties onward as a visiting scholar at numerous universities. The very establishment that he turned his back on welcomed him into the fold with open arms – an ironic twist that led some to question his integrity. However, one of Ginsberg’s pleasures in life was to be an instructor and mentor to others. On the advice of several spiritual gurus, he left drug experimentation behind and instead looked to other people for fulfillment. Instilling the next generation with his passion and belief in the human spirit was for Ginsberg the best way to be an effective “prophet-poet” in the tradition of his idol, Walt Whitman.

No Beat Generation novelist garnered more attention and adulation than Jack Kerouac, and none of their personal lives were more filled with conflict, confusion and crippling depression. Eventually dying from his alcoholism, Kerouac was never happy with the position that he attained as the de facto spokesperson for his generation. He was reportedly quite shy, and had a difficult time with the rejection that he faced early in his career. His single greatest success was *On the Road*, a philosophical travel narrative which blends stream of consciousness, drug visions, and profound observations into a generational statement that resonates to this day. The book made him immediately famous. Even his Beat Generation cohorts were rather taken aback with the creativity and passion which emanated from the quiet Kerouac. In addition to novels and philosophy, he wrote a great deal about the craft of fiction, or at least his version of that craft. Kerouac’s half-brilliant, half-incomprehensible meditations on the work of making literature are windows into the Beat consciousness. Inside, one finds great potential often hampered by disarray, and an unquenchable idealism which crashes hard against the bitter reality of American consumer culture. In a sense, Jack Kerouac was the most fragile of all the Beat Generation writers. He succumbed to the pressure of fame and attention. While Ginsberg deflected the weight of expectation, Kerouac carried it on his shoulders, and it eventually crushed him.

If William S. Burroughs had produced nothing else of note besides *Naked Lunch*, he would still be considered one of the preeminent Beat writers. Perhaps more than his contemporaries, Burroughs embodied the spirit of reckless abandon for which the Beat Generation was known. In Mexico City, on a drunken spree, Burroughs accidentally shot his first wife Jane Vollmer in the head. The only reason he was in Mexico was to avoid possible imprisonment in the United States. The near savagery of his life would naturally carry over into his artistic efforts. His greatest contribution to literary technique was what he called the “cut-up,” a form which borrowed more from collage and cubism than traditional linear narrative. The blatant disregard for narrative effectively mirrored Burroughs’ mental state, as he forever struggled with alcohol and drug addictions. *Naked Lunch* is a difficult and sometimes terrifying novel to engage with, though readers continue to be drawn to in for its style, use of language, and

Criticism of the Beat Generation’s aesthetics and behavior came from many corners of society. The academic community derided the Beats as anti-intellectual and unrefined. Mainstream America was horrified by their supposed sexual deviancy and illicit drug use. Established poets and novelists looked down upon the freewheeling abandon of Beat literature. Politicians such as Joseph McCarthy identified elements of Beat ideology as Communist and a threat to the nation’s security. The Beat Generation effectively absorbed all of these barbs without disintegrating. However, their relatively short time in the spotlight of literature and culture could be attributed to the amount of scorn heaped upon them. The original coinage of “Beat” was meant to imply a people beaten down and walked over, and in the early 1950s that interpretation was very apt.

The Beat Generation made a lasting impact on the structure of modern American society. With Ginsberg’s *Howl*, the notion of what was acceptable literature was broadened immensely. Censorship as a force for modulating public discourse, in the realm of literature at least, came to an end. Perhaps more importantly, the Beats propelled discussions of ecology and environmentalism into the mainstream. Before the 1950s, environmentalism as it is understood today did not really exist. The Beat Generation’s infatuation with Native American and Eastern philosophies contributed to the genesis of modern environmental ethics, at least as a byproduct. Modern poetry underwent a relaxation of structure and style that basically allowed for anyone to express themselves in whatever fashion they chose. Experimentation became an expectation, as the stuffy formalism of the Moderns was wholly subverted.

The Beat Generation faded from view as quickly as it appeared. Quickly stepping into the void were the beatniks. Despite the similar sounding names, the beatniks had very little in common with the Beats. Instead of a movement and an ideology, the beatniks represented little more than a fashion. Specifically, the beatnik was the laid-back, poetry reading goateed man, usually dressed in black. It is possible that this fashion was the result of society’s consumption and regurgitation of the Beat Generation aesthetic. If that’s the case, then the Beat writers were consumed and commodified by the very culture they sought to undermine. The hippie movement of the 1960s also owes a great debt to the Beats, though probably the Beats would not be quick to own that claim. The counterculture hippies generally lacked the intellectual backing that the Beats earned in the 1940s. In order to rebel and change a system, one must have some knowledge of the inner workings of that system. The Beat Generation was more educated and sophisticated than they seemed at first glance. Their artistic rebellion was calculated, and informed with an understanding of what came before them.

**Major Writers of the Beat Generation**

* Ginsberg, Allen (1926-1997)
* Kerouac, Jack (1922-1969)
* Burroughs, William S. (1914-1997)
* Corso, Gregory (1930-2001)
* Ferlinghetti, Lawrence (1919-)
* Cassady, Neal (1926-1968)
* Solomon, Carl (1928-1993)
* Holmes, John Clellon (1926-1988)
* Johnson, Joyce (1935-)
* Kesey, Ken (1935-2001)
* Brautigan, Richard (1935-1984)

Snyder, Gary (1930-)