**The History of American Literature**

Professor Carrier ~ S16

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**The Beat Generation.**

1. What is it?
	1. Jack Kerouac first used the term “Beat.” He also sometimes called it the “found” generation, or the “angelic” generation. The term has several meanings.
		1. Kerouac felt that the young people of his generation were “beat down,” or oppressed, by the rigid rules of society. They wanted to break away from the boring life of their parents.
		2. The term “beat” is also a reference to the beat of a drum. The Beats experimented with music and the non-traditional and experimental beats of Jazz music appealed to them.
		3. Kerouac was also comparing the Beat Generation (post-WWII) to the Lost Generation (post-WWI). The Lost Generation was addressing the loss of faith, or the death of religion. The Beat Generation was in many ways trying to find a new religion what valued humanity and human nature. They were trying to find something valuable in themselves.
	2. The movement was a criticism of the boring Middle Class normality that came about after World War II. The Beats called these people “square.”
	3. They used new forms of literature and art to express themselves.
	4. The movement was characterized by an “exploration of consciousness.” They wanted to understand thought. As Nietzsche says (kind of) “You are only thinking when you are thinking about thinking.” They though a lot about thinking. How?
		1. Drugs, especially marijuana and, later, LSD.
		2. Buddhism and other Eastern Religions.
		3. Alcohol.
	5. The movement was not centered in one place, but New York (especially Greenwich Village) and San Francisco were very important.
	6. The social scene of the group focused on group activities.
		1. Poetry readings in coffeehouses and small bookshops, sometimes accompanied by music (the City Lights Bookshop in San Francisco was the headquarters of the group).
		2. They had a close relationship with Jazz musicians and influenced the folk music movement. Bob Dylan, one of the most important musicians of the period, started writing poetry after reading a book by Beat writer Jack Kerouac.
		3. They often lived together in communal houses. They rejected the idea of private property and often shared houses, food, and money with each other.
		4. They were open to non-traditional sexual relationships. They accepted homosexuality, open relationships, and group sex. They talked of a “sexual revolution.”
	7. The subject of the literature and other art was usually biographical.
	8. There was no specific philosophy of the Beat movement. They were mainly just trying to be different and to do whatever “mainstream” society hated.
		1. They valued “pleasure” and freedom over money.
		2. Travel and homelessness were seen as very important. They were always moving, going someplace. The idea of buying a home and getting a job and doing the same thing day after day was their idea of hell.
	9. The Beats just wanted to be left alone to do as they wish.
		1. They fought against censorship (Both “Howl” and *Naked Lunch* were the focus of obscenity trials.)
		2. They tried to get drugs like marijuana legalized.
		3. They promoted music that society thought evil, like Rock and Roll.
		4. They led the way in the early environmental movement.
		5. They were against war and refused to be drafted into the army during Vietnam.
		6. They respected minority groups and led the way during the Civil Rights Movement in helping African-American people gain equality.
		7. They taught that Native American peoples should be respected and treated with dignity.
		8. They just wanted to have fun.
2. Important figures.
	1. Jack Kerouac (1922-1969)
		1. Bio. Born of French-Canadian parents in Lowell, Massachusetts. His father was a successful businessman but difficulties during the Depression led him to alcoholism. Kerouac tried to help the family and got a football scholarship to Columbia University in New York but quickly dropped out. He joined the Merchant Marines during WWII. In New York he met Ginsberg and Burroughs and Neal Cassidy, a self proclaimed “street cowboy.” Their friendship would form the subject of Kerouac’s greatest novel, *On the Road.* Kerouac was considered one of the leaders of the movement, an idea he always rejected. He was a lifelong alcoholic and died of internal bleeding at a young age.
	2. Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
		1. Bio. Ginsberg was the son of an American schoolteacher and a Russian immigrant. His mother’s madness was a source of many problems for him as a boy. He also had sexual feelings for the other boys as a child and didn’t understand this. He was a student at Columbia University with Kerouac but was kicked out. He lived with Kerouac and Burroughs for a time after that. His most famous poem, “Howl,” was a description of the Beat thinking.
	3. William Burroughs (1914-1997)
		1. Bio. When Ginsberg and Kerouac met Burroughs he was addicted to morphine and struggling to get published. His life at this time was an incredible adventure of sex and drugs and problems with the police, all of which he used for material in his later books. His most famous work is probably *Naked Lunch*, a strange and experimental novel that influenced many writers. In 1951, Burroughs shot and killed his girlfriend in a drunken game of “William Tell” at a party in Mexico City. He spent 13 days in jail before his brother came to Mexico City and bribed Mexican lawyers and officials to release him.
	4. Other important figures.
		1. Neal Cassady. Not a writer himself, Cassady was nonetheless an important figure in the Beat movement as a subject. He was close with all of the three figures above, and had a sexual relationship with Ginsberg for a time. He died at the age of 42 under mysterious circumstances.
		2. Lawrence Ferlinghetti. A San Francisco poet and publisher, his City Lights Bookstore first published many of the Beats important works.
		3. Kenneth Rexroth. (1905-1982) Older than the members of the movement, the poet Rexroth is sometimes called “the father of the Beats.” Rexroth’s apartment was an important meeting place for the Beat figures in San Francisco and is the setting for many scenes in their stories.
		4. Gary Snyder. (b. 1930) Snyder’s writings focused on the spiritual and natural world, especially Buddhism. He is considered one of the founders of the “Deep Ecology” movement, a group of radical environmentalists. He is deeply fascinated with Asian culture, and has translated many works from Chinese and Japanese into English.

Classroom Discussion Question:

* Discuss Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” with your group. The poem makes a statement about some of the things that the Beat Generation hates and some of the things that they like. Make a list of both with specific examples from the language of the poem. Try to think of as many things as you can, even if you are not sure…write them all down. We will discuss your ideas during our next class.