

The Beat Generation

Initial Situation

- **Postwar America:** Pride, Puritan work ethic, flourishing economy, conservative
- **Society:** Consumer culture, materialism, conformity

Beginnings

- Beat Generation, also called Beat movement, is an **American social and literary movement originating in the 1950s** and centered in the bohemian artist communities of San Francisco and New York City
- **Core group** consisted of **Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and William S. Burroughs**, who met in the neighborhood surrounding Columbia University in uptown Manhattan in the mid-40's
- Street hustler Herbert Huncke originally used the phrase "beat" in an earlier discussion with Kerouac. The adjective "**beat**" colloquially means "tired" or "beaten down" within the African-American community. Kerouac appropriated the image and altered the meaning to include the connotations "**upbeat**", "**beatific**" and the musical association of "**being on the beat**".
- The phrase "**Beat Generation**" was **invented by Jack Kerouac in 1948**. The phrase was introduced to the general public in 1952 when Kerouac's friend John Clellon Holmes wrote an article 'This is the Beat Generation' for the New York Times Magazine.
- The Beats wrote **poetry and novels**, talked about **philosophy** and the **meaning of life**; they met other writers, became jazz addicted and **experimented with drugs**
- **Central elements** of "Beat culture" included **rejection of received standards, innovations in style**, experimentation with drugs, **alternative sexualities**, an **interest in Eastern religion** and a **rejection of materialism**

Breakthrough

- In the early 1950s Ginsberg and Kerouac left New York and headed for San Francisco
- **San Francisco** was the center of the avant-garde poetic renaissance and a **heaven for artists and writers**
- On October 13, 1955 **Ginsberg** gave his **famous groundbreaking reading** of *Howl* at the Six Gallery
- In 1957 *Howl* and *On The Road* were published → May 1957: San Francisco police raided bookstores and confiscated copies of *Howl* and other books considered to be obscene
 - **Landmark case for American literary history:** Judge W. J. Clayton Horn ruled that *Howl* was not obscene and stated, ". . . An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words."

Core Group

Jack Kerouac

- Born on March 12, 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts; his parents were French-Canadian
- Was discharged from Navy due to possessing a schizoid personality
- Became a **leader and a spokesperson for the Beat Generation**

- ***On the Road*** (1957):
 - Semi-autobiographical novel, exemplified the carefree Beat lifestyle
 - Main character in this story hitchhikes across the country with his friend Dean Moriarty (inspired by fellow Beat adventurer Neal Cassady) and enjoys casual friendships, love affairs and experiences
 - The non-materialistic lifestyle of the protagonists was embraced by many readers
 - The new writing was spontaneous, possessed strange energy, shocked more established writers

Allen Ginsberg

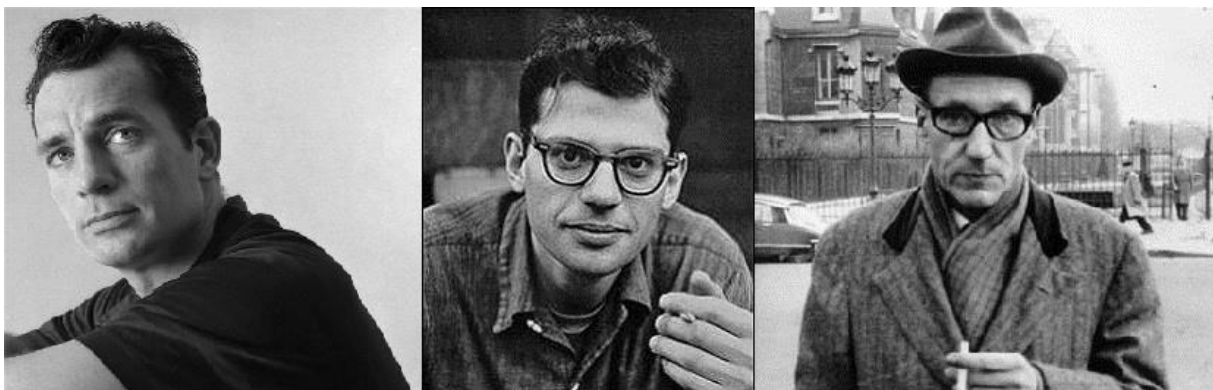
- Born in 1926 in Newark, New Jersey
- Held a variety of odd jobs before becoming an established writer
- Many of his **writings** were interpreted as **controversial** and even **obscene**
- Writings deal with **subjects** such as **narcotics** and the experiences under **their influence**
- **Howl** (1957)

William S. Burroughs

- Born in St. Louis, Missouri on February 5, 1914; he grew up under fairly comfortable circumstances
- He was well known for his openly **homoerotic tendencies** and frequently wrote about his **experiments with narcotic substances**
- Burroughs is best known for helping **establishing the collage technique**, a writing style, many perceive to be pretentious and confusing
- His writing centered around the **underworld and drug sub-cultures**
- **Naked Lunch** (1959)
 - Reader follows the narration of junkie William Lee
 - Based on Burroughs' own experiences
 - Burroughs states in his introduction that Jack Kerouac suggested the title
 - Extremely controversial in both its subject matter and its use of obscene language

→ **Beat poets** advocated a kind of free, unstructured composition in which the writer put down his thoughts and feelings without plan or revision to convey the immediacy of experience.

→ The Movement paved the way for change that grew into the Hippy Movement in the 1960s.



Women of the Beat Generation

Joan Vollmer Adams

- The Muse
- most prominent female member of the early Beat Generation circle
- common-law wife of William Burroughs
- appears often in works of Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg

Diane di Prima

- The Writer
- bridge figure between the Beat movement and the later hippies, as well as between East Coast and West Coast artists
- co-founded the *New York Poets Theatre* as well as founded the *Poets Press*
- *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969)

Carolyn Cassady

- The Wife
- married Neal Cassady
- relationship with Jack Kerouac (*Heart Beat*)
- *Off the Road* (1990)

Beat in Germany

- Translations
- Underground Literature

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