

Topic Page: [Beat generation](#)

Definition: **Beat Generation** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n (functioning as singular or plural)

1 members of the generation that came to maturity in the 1950s, whose rejection of the social and political systems of the West was expressed through contempt for regular work, possessions, traditional dress, etc, and espousal of anarchism, communal living, drugs, etc

2 a group of US writers, notably Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, who emerged in the 1950s

Summary Article: **Beat Poets**

From *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*

Beat Poets refers to a literary cluster of poets and writers who achieved notoriety during the years after World War II through the early 1960s. The literary movement, which also included novelists and essayists, was located primarily in New York City and San Francisco. Writers now accepted as central parts of the American canon were then thought of both by the mainstream literary establishment and themselves as fringe writers. The loose affiliation of writers included Alan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and William Burroughs in New York City, who merged with the San Francisco Renaissance poets Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. Although the group is now known primarily for its writers, others were not primarily writers: Neil Cassady, the ultimate Beat figure and the model for Kerouac's protagonist in *On the Road*; Herbert Huncke, the New York City street hustler; Carolyn Cassady, one of Neil's wives, who offered her perspective on the Beats.

The term *beat* was originally used by jazz musicians and New York City street hustlers to describe something that was worn down, tired, or poor. An old, threadbare jacket with holes was beat. By the time this word reached the group of men gathering around Alan Ginsberg and William Burroughs, it suggested to Jack Kerouac a special spirituality. For Kerouac, the son of a strong Catholic mother, beat alluded to the beatitudes and being beatific. Shortly after this, Kerouac used the phrase to define his generation in a late-night conversation with another writer friend, John Clellon Holmes.

The term was then officially launched by Holmes in November 1952. Based on his conversations with Kerouac and his observations of Ginsberg, Neil Cassady, and Kerouac, Holmes had written a novel titled *Go* (one of Cassady's catchphrases). That November, he also wrote an article, "This Is the Beat Generation," for the *Sunday Times*. His novel and article began to raise public interest about the Beats and their mission.

The group of East Coast writers and thinkers were trying to articulate what they called a new vision of art that was more organic and less rule-bound. At the heart of their search was the belief that an alternative consciousness laid behind or beyond our everyday consciousness and that it could be reached through literature. This quest inspired them to push the boundaries in both social and literary realms.

On the social side, many of the early group considered themselves outcasts and, as such, had greater

freedom to move beyond society's rules. They experimented with drugs, in particular heroin; occasionally stole money for drugs or forged prescriptions; and did not keep steady jobs. In addition, the homosexuality and sexual freedom of many of the Beats further shocked conservative America.

On the literary side, the East Coast Beats experimented with the forms and rules of literature, freeing both prose and poetry from conventions in favor of more personal and spontaneous methods of creating. They consciously styled their writing on jazz artists, including Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. These influences, in turn, gave birth to wildly experimental poems and novels, such as Ginsberg's "Howl," Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*.

"Howl" is one of Ginsberg's best-known works, and its publication in May 1957 clearly marked him as a central figure in what had come to be known as the Beat Generation. With its frequent references to drugs, sex, and genitalia, along with profanities, "Howl" landed its publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and its author in court battling obscenity charges. The well-publicized trial in San Francisco did much to solidify Ginsberg's reputation as a major poet, and after his acquittal, sales of the book rose dramatically.

Appearing just after Ginsberg's trial, Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* put Kerouac at the center of the Beat movement. A loosely autobiographical novel condensing 10 years of traveling into four distinct trips, *On the Road* put Kerouac on the map for both his energetic, improvisational prose style and for his portrayal of Neil Cassady as the character Dean Moriarty. Moriarty burns with a frenetic nonconformist energy that made the book into the archetype of American 1950s counterculture.

The third work of major importance from the East Coast Beat scene was William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs, a Harvard graduate living in New York City during the early 1950s, mentored the younger members of the group, including Ginsberg and Kerouac, in fiction and poetry. However, it was not until he wrote his memoirs as a drug addict in New York City (published as *Junk* in 1953) that he really thought of himself as a writer. His next book, *Naked Lunch*, was published in 1959 and firmly established Burroughs as an important voice in describing the subculture of heroin addicts.

The close-knit group that made up the East Coast Beats in New York City had little overall impact in American culture before the mid-1950s, when Ginsberg and Kerouac went to California and combined their talents with those of the San Francisco Renaissance Poets. While Ginsberg and Kerouac were dropping out of Columbia University and attempting to articulate their new vision of American art, San Francisco was hosting its own developing counter-literature scene. Poets Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, Weldon Kees, Ruth Witt-Diamant, and others had helped renew interest in poetry in the Bay Area. Rexroth held weekly meetings in his apartment to discuss poetry, politics, and social issues. These gatherings frequently overflowed into the hall and into a downstairs meeting hall. Duncan had also gathered a group around him across the bay in Berkeley. Kees organized the Poet's Follies, and Witt-Diamant founded the San Francisco State College Poetry Center. In addition, numerous underground and small print-run publications, such as *Circle*, *Ark*, and *The Illiterati*, appeared. These presses were active in publishing the poetry of the lesser-known poets and translations of poetry from other countries.

Ginsberg arrived in the middle of this energy in 1954. By the summer of 1955, he had enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley graduate school program in English. However, that summer and fall, Ginsberg would be involved in two other ventures which did much more to bring the new vision before the American public: the writing of "Howl" and the October 7 poetry reading at the Six Gallery.

The reading at the Six Gallery has now become legendary for introducing five Beat writers to the world. In addition to Ginsberg, the readers were Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia. Kenneth Rexroth served as the master of ceremonies. Ginsberg read his newly written poem, "Howl," to the loud acclaim of the audience.

With the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* and *On the Road*, the obscenity trial around "Howl," and the Gallery Six reading, the Beats were firmly established as a literary group with followers and imitators across the country. There was soon a canon of work by Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Burroughs, Snyder, Ferlinghetti, McClure, Whalen, and Kaufman. These men produced a variety of works that appeared in a slew of anthologies with the word *Beat* in the title.

However, as the movement swelled and gained national notoriety during the mid-1960s, it dissipated somewhat, morphing into the hippie culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Now, the Beat Generation is being studied on campuses nationwide not just for the timeliness of their work but also for their relationship to and impact on mainstream society.

See also

Dissent; Ginsberg, Allen; Literature and Activism

Further Readings

- Charters, A. (Ed.). (1992). *The portable Beat reader*. New York: Penguin.

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