



Beat Poetry

Alan Haffa

Who Is Beat?

- Jack Kerouac: *On the Road*
- Allen Ginsberg: "Howl"
- Gregory Corso
- William S Burroughs: *Naked Lunch*
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti: City Lights Bookstore
- Mike McClure
- Peter Orlovsky: Poet and companion of Ginsberg
- Opposed to Dominant School of Literature in 1950s: New Criticism—focus on form

Influences

- Walt Whitman: Long Poetic Line
- French Symbolists: Arthur Rimbaud: Embrace of Bohemian counter culture lifestyle
- Romantics: Percy Shelley; William Blake; John Keats: Rebels; Passion; Transcendence
- Other Rebels in their Time: Christopher Marlowe
- Modernism: Ezra Pound; T.S. Eliot; William Carlos Williams
- Jazz Music, Charlie Parker: Creative freedom and spontaneity

What is Beat

- “New Vision” for America: oppositional to materialism and conformity
- Beat opposed to “square”
- Friendship with Ginsberg
- Ginsberg drew association with “Beatitude” and asserted Beat as a spiritual movement
- Use of Narcotic
- New Bohemianism; Sexual Freedom; Exploration; Anarchical; Distrust of all Systems and Institutions

Techniques

- Kerouac's concept of "Spontaneous Prose"
- Meter should be natural, not forced
- Ginsberg's "Eyeball Kick": juxtaposing two strong, contrasting images
- Anaphora: Repetition
- Catachresis: Deliberate Misuse of a word

Women Beat Writers?

- “Indeed, the Beat movement is notable for the considerable number of women writers who were part of the scene, but dismissed or overlooked, even as they wrote both privately and publicly.”
- Ruth Weiss; Diane di Prima, Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones, Ann Charters, Joanne Kyger, Brenda Frazer
- “their refusal to be silenced by assumption about their fitness as subjects and authors of Beat writing...how women Beats broke the rule of Cool that confined their sex to the status of the silent bohemian “chick.””
- Nancy Grace and Ronna Johnson, *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*. 2004

Nancy di Prima, "The Quarrel"

1961: <http://womenbeats.blogspot.com/>

"You know I thought I've got work to do too sometimes. In fact I probably have just as fucking much work to do as you do....

A piece of wood fell out of the fire and I poked it back in with my toe. I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes. I am just as lazy as you. Maybe lazier. The top of my shoe was scorched from the fire and I rubbed it where the suede was gone.

Just because I happen to be a chick I thought...

...And what a god damned concession it was for me to bother to tell you that I was bugged at all I said to the back of his neck. I didn't say it out loud.

I got up and went into the kitchen to do the dishes. And shit I thought I probably won't bother again. But I'll get bugged and not bother to tell you and after a while everything will be awful and I'll never say anything because it's so fucking uncool to talk about it. And that I thought will be that and what shame."

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)

- Met Kerouac and Burroughs at Columbia; Anti-Academic Inclination of Beats
- Met Peter Orlovsky in S.F. in 1954; Lovers, Homosexuality and Beat Movement
- Buddhism and Hinduism
- “Howl” performed; Six Gallery Reading, 1955; Obscenity Trial, 1957
- Supported Communism and Worker Rights Movements; but later was denounced by many communist countries

Howl, from Part I:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4950578>

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
Dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
Angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of
night,
Who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat
up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water
flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating
jazz,..."

“Howl” from Part II

“What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch...incomprehensible prison!; pure machinery!; Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!

“Howl” from Part III

“Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland

Where you’re madder than I am

I’m with you in Rockland

where you must feel very strange

I’m with you in Rockland

where you imitate the shade of my mother...”

Observations on "Howl"

- Part I: a Description of the Beat Generation
- Giving Voice to the Outcast, the Unheard
- Part II: Protest against "Moloch": Biblical God to whom children are sacrificed; The System;
- Part III: Carl Solomon; "I'm with you in Rockland"; Attempt to create community; to bridge the despair of the isolated individual

The Beat Myth and Hero

- “The distinguishing characteristic of the Beat Generation, is, ... the fact that they have a myth. The myth follows authentic archaic lines, and goes something like this. The hero is the “angelheaded hipster.” He comes of anonymous parentage, parents whom he denies...He has received a mysterious call—to the road, the freights, the jazz-dens, the “negro streets.” This is the night journey or journey underground...Where he goes is hell, the realm of death, ruled by the H- or Hades bomb...it is silly to act as if you were in heaven, so he acts like a damned soul. His tortures---the heroic “ordeals” of myth—send him into ecstasy and he burst into song, song filled with metaphors of destruction...”
- Dorothy Van Ghent, “Comment” in *A Casebook on the Beat*.

Overview of Beats

- “Most of its members are against collectiveness of any description, a great many of them even refuse to admit there is any such thing as a Beat Generation, and most of them spend hours differing vehemently with their own kind...have raised their voices against virtually every aspect of American society: Mom, Dad, Politics, Marriage, the Savings Bank, Organized Religion, Literary Elegance, Law, the Ivy League Suit and Higher Education, to say nothing of the Automatic Dishwasher, the Cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level House and the clean, or peace-provoking, H-bomb.”
- Paul O’Neil, “The Only Rebellion Around,” in *A Casebook on the Beat*.

Summary in words of O'Neil

- "The Beat Generation, however, is primarily important in the U.S. as the voice of non-conformity, the fount of what might be described as a sort of nonpolitical radicalism. The Ginsbergs, Kerouacs and Corsos, like the dissidents who emulate them, are social rebels first and poets only second. Even as writers they seem more intent on revenging themselves on the squares and yowling at the world than on triumphs of literary composition. A great deal of their verse is written to be read aloud before audiences, and the most noted of them are performers...It is a curious rebellion—unplanned, unorganized and based on a thousand personal neuroses and a thousand conflicting egos, but it is oddly effectively withall. No matter what else it may be, it is not boring, and in the U.S. of the 1950s it is the only rebellion in town."