

My research focused on the Beat Generation, especially Jack Kerouac and his observant and analytical methods of examining people. Through his writing, Kerouac was able to create personal and very authentic portraits of people. The purpose of my photography series was to create personal and intimate descriptions of people through the use of photography and objects. Photography, when used effectively, can be an extremely powerful way of depicting a subject from the photographer's perspective. I began by photographing a wide variety of subjects, some whom I knew well and some I don't know as well. I found significantly greater success shooting those whom I had a strong relationship with, as it was easier for me to connect with them through the lens on a more profound level. After I had selected which subjects' portraits to exhibit, I asked each to provide me with multiple objects that they felt describe them on a deep level. In contrast with the photography, the curated objects give the subjects a completely independent outlet to express themselves from their own perspectives. I want my viewers to be able to feel connected to my subjects through the photos and objects.

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The Influence Of Beat Literature

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“Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”

- Jack Kerouac, On the Road

“The first sip [of tea] is joy, the second is gladness, the third is serenity, the fourth is madness, the fifth is ecstasy.”

- Jack Kerouac, Dharma Bums

“Happy. Just in my swim shorts, barefooted, wild-haired, in the red fire dark, singing, swigging wine, spitting, jumping, running—that's the way to live. All alone and free in the soft sands of the beach by the sight of the sea out there, with the Ma-Wink fallopian virgin warm stars reflecting on the outer channel fluid belly waters.”

- Jack Kerouac, Dharma Bums

The Beat Generation was a literary movement in the 1950s, characterized by anti-establishment views and obscene discussions. But how has the Beat Generation influenced culture since the 50's? Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs have influenced music, counterculture movements, and societal beliefs to this very day. Famous musicians such as Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead exist as a result of the beats, and the culture of cities such as San Francisco and New York were changed significantly thanks to the beat movement.

I have always been curious as to how legitimate change is sparked and initiated, and the way in which media affects society. The story of the Beat Generation teaches us those things, as well as more. Even before I had taken such matters into consideration, *On the Road* had been one of my favorite novels and I had been extremely interested in Kerouac and his story, as well as the rest of the beat movement but had never been motivated to explore more. I loved the spirit of freedom and perspective Kerouac possessed, and the emphasis on exploration and travel. *On the Road* has also instilled a dream of going on a similar westward road trip one day (without as much dangerous hedonism). I also enjoy the anti-establishment and society-defying principles of Kerouac's work, as well as his ideas about Nature.

Countercultural and rebellious movements have always had significant impact on cultures. Free-thinkers and rule-breakers are some of the most efficient figures when it comes to enacting change. From Socrates, to Thoreau, to Martin Luther King Jr., those who think outside the boundaries of society often have massive influences on culture. As Jack Kerouac said, "*Great things are not accomplished by those who yield to trends and fads and popular opinion.*" Many rebellious figures take advantage of the innate power media has to influence masses, and the inherent pedestal art provides creators. Literature, especially poetry, is a surefire way to provide people with an opportunity to see things from a different perspective. It becomes more powerful when the literature is open to interpretation, or encourages the reader to ask questions as well as being also an incredibly healthy outlet for emotions, and perhaps one of the most raw medium for emotional vulnerability. Music is also an incredibly powerful way to influence. It is not held back by the boundaries of language, as sounds are already a powerful way to communicate. Combined with powerful poetry, music is an unstoppable force. Combined, these forces make up a large portion of the media society takes in. If people engage with as much literature and music as possible, they will be gaining mass amounts of understanding and knowledge and engaging with many various and different perspectives. This all encourages deep and critical thinking, as so much literature and music asks more than it answers. Such medias not only teach us about the world, but about ourselves. However, the power of media is also the reason it can be dangerous. We must be our own critics, and be conscious about what we consume. When we let other people choose what we consume for us, we unwittingly subscribe to their beliefs without fully educating and exposing ourselves. As stated by Allen Ginsberg, "whoever controls the media, the images, controls the culture." In modern society, culture is defined by the media, therefore whoever controls the media defines the culture.

The Beat Generation is an example of a powerful literary movement that changed the course of history. A 1950's movement that brought issues such as addiction, sexual repression, and materialism to light, the Beat Generation defied the limits of what could be discussed and what was considered art. The three leading writers of The Beat Generation were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, And William Burroughs. It was a way of coping with the way things were changing after World War II, and provided a voice for those who were downtrodden and beaten down.

Jack Kerouac grew up in a conservative family from Lowell, Massachusetts, and then attended Columbia University on a scholarship for football, until he dropped out after a dispute with his coach. Kerouac is best known for *On the Road*, a novel written with spontaneous prose that is essentially a memoir of a specific period of Kerouac's life. Kerouac goes under the name of Sal Paradise in the book, which relates his search for a purpose as well as his in-depth observation of Neal Cassady (represented by the character Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*). Dean is an energetic, youthful, and volatile character who has very hedonistic values. Dean and Sal adventure across the US, exploring drugs, sex, and their own friendship along the way. Sal develops an idolization of Dean, while he does often exhibit a lack of respect for Dean's more harmful actions. Sal grapples with a new idea of American identity, not one that idolizes economic and material success, sex, or nationalism, but one that places emphasis upon camaraderie, exploration, and, above all else, freedom. "I yelled for joy. We passed the bottle. The great blazing stars came out, the far receding hills got dim. I felt like an arrow that could shoot out all the way (p. 23, Kerouac)." I believe this illustrates an image of the America we should strive to achieve, where we find ourselves and happiness through fellowship and pursuit of the unknown. Kerouac has an innate ability to express emotion through the small actions and events that lead to certain experience, likely due to the fact that *On the Road* is based on his real experiences. He does not rely on big monumental moments to tell stories, but he instead employs the power of small yet substantial moments.

The classic idealistic vision of The American West has had a significant impact on art and literature in the United States, and *On the Road* is no exception. This sense of exploration embodied by the idea of the untamed, wild, and opportunistic West is explored thoroughly by Kerouac. He finds dangerous frontiers and cowboyish mannerisms in Denver, and old western impressions in the Mississippi River region. He also discovers the melancholy side of the West, in the sense that modernization and increasing transportation systems have left far fewer areas unexplored and had a significant degradation upon the glorious unrestrained character of western America. Throughout *On the Road*, Kerouac, through Sal, explores themes regarding the rejection of authority mostly through his observations of Dean. Dean consistently breaks laws and defies standards of how a young man should live, for better or for worse. He is the quintessential rebel without a cause. Dean does not have a healthy outlet by which to express his distaste with authority and the system, often wreaking havoc upon the wrong people, places, or things. Sal and Dean find their escape from authority in Mexico, and this escape from authority is arguably negative, as seen by Dean's loss of control. Kerouac also looks deeply into the cultural cycle America has proven itself to be stuck in. This is compared to the cycle of water, such as when water flows through the Mississippi and reaches its end, only to once again rain down upon the land. This also is a reference to the contrast between societal constructs and vast natural landscapes.

Another popular novel by Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, is written by a more relaxed, slightly more in-control Kerouac. Rather than being led by Neal Cassady's hedonism, Kerouac has found relative peace in Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder, an activist and writer in real life), a nature-loving, compassionate, and freely living Buddhist. Japhy enjoys green tea, mountaineering, reading, and healthy responsible sex.

"We pushed the bike down past the various college hangouts and cafeterias and looked into Robbie's to see if we knew anybody. Alvah was in there, working his part-time job as busboy. Japhy and I were kind of outlandish-looking on the campus in our old clothes in fact Japhy was considered an eccentric around the campus,

which is the usual thing for campuses and college people to think whenever a real man appears on the scene -- college being nothing but grooming schools for the middle-class non-identity which usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing at the same time while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization. 'All these people,' said Japhy, 'they all got white-tiled toilets and take big dirty craps like bears in the mountains, but it's all washed away to convenient supervised sewers and nobody thinks of crap any more or realizes their origin is shit and civet and scum of the sea. They spend all day washing their hands with creamy soaps they secretly wanta eat in the bathroom.'"

Japhy places emphasis on connection with the world rather than material goods. However, Kerouac increasingly grapples with alcoholism throughout the book, foreshadowing his severe issues in the future. In *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac begins to define his idealistic life and world, and the way he wants society to change.

"I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures ..."

Kerouac may also have been racist. Many of his descriptions of minority cultures were patronizing, condescending, or outright racist. However, opponents of civil rights didn't like the way Kerouac assimilated black and white cultures as they thought it was tasteless. In my opinion, Kerouac exhibited more of an apathy to such matters rather than racism or a passion for social justice. Kerouac was statedly very apathetic when it came to politics. Kerouac lived to age 47, when he then passed away due to an internal hemorrhage as the result of his severe and chronic alcoholism.

Allen Ginsberg is a poet best known for his poem *Howl*. *Howl* is an obscene, blunt, direct, and aggressive poem that is full of descriptions of sex, drugs, places, characters, and insanity. Lots of strong language and obscenities, lots of weird and unusual language. *Howl* went on trial for obscenity but was found to have redeeming social value. It conveys a myriad of very human emotions, told through three parts. Some segments are very repetitive and told in a chant like manner. *Howl* spoke for those without voices, and described the issues Ginsberg and his generation faced. "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked ..." (cite) A description of *Howl* being read by Ginsberg at the famous 6 gallery reading in San Francisco is in *Dharma Bums*. Kerouac was present, and was allegedly pouring wine and encouraging Ginsberg.

Ginsberg was a well-known homosexual activist and even had sexual relationships with Neal Cassady. While Neal was more interested in heterosexual relationships, he possessed very few inhibitions and often did whatever he could to charm others. After *Howl* gained notoriety,

Ginsberg became a very famous leftist figure. Ginsberg was a Buddhist. Ginsberg was not only a Beat figure, but also a figure in the 60s counterculture movement and led non-violent protests against things such as the Vietnam War and the war on drugs. Ginsberg was against militarism, sexual repression, and materialism. Ginsberg also went to Columbia University, which is where he met lots of the other Beats. Ginsberg was very pro-free speech, and also expressed pro-communist ideals. However, communist countries weren't all too friendly to him once they realized he was in favor of free speech and liberalism. He was an advocate of marijuana use and the demystification of LSD. He also had some questionable opinions, such as his support of NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association), an organization in favor of pedophilia. Ginsberg died at 70 to liver cancer and hepatitis.

William Burroughs, perhaps the most controversial of the Beat writers, was a chronic drug user and a person of very questionable character. He attended Harvard University, and then enlisted in the army. After being turned down from the army, he picked up his drug habit. Burroughs differed greatly from Ginsberg, especially in regard to his political beliefs. Burroughs once said about Ginsberg, "The frontiersman has shrunk to a wretched, interfering, Liberal bureaucrat. Allen, by the way, has been utterly corrupted by those Liberal psychiatrists. He talks of becoming a labor leader! I wrote him what I think about Labor Leaders, Unions, and Liberals... You notice that any oppressive, meddling piece of legislation (anti-gun, anti-sex, anti-kick laws) is always loudly supported by the "Liberal" press? The word liberal has come to stand for the most damnable tyranny, a sniveling, mealy-mouthed tyranny of bureaucrats, social workers, psychiatrists and Union officials." Burroughs was against politics of any sort, and claimed that, "Political conflicts are merely surface manifestations... To concern yourself with surface political conflicts is to make the mistake of the bull in the ring, you are charging the cloth. That is what politics is for, to teach you the cloth. Just as the bullfighter teaches the bull, teaches him to follow, obey the cloth." Burroughs also killed his wife in Mexico. He initially claimed that it was a failed attempt at a game, and then that it was an accident as the result of him dropping his gun. Burroughs was best known for his novel *Naked Lunch*, a series of vignettes describing his extensive drugs use. *Naked Lunch* is shockingly vulgar and obscene, with graphic descriptions of pedophilia and murder, as well as awful descriptions of addiction. The novel was also under trial for obscenity, but was found to have redeeming social value. Jack Kerouac knew Burroughs well, and wrote about him thoroughly in *On the Road*. Burroughs, even after extensive narcotic use, lived to age 83 when he died from complications resulting from a heart attack.

Beat Culture changed what was acceptable in the literary world. Kerouac brought spontaneous prose to the mainstream, and Ginsberg changed people's perspective on poetry. Both made it acceptable for poetry to be far more casual and less structurally stringent. Burroughs novels were also absolute chaos, and that kind of disarray had never before been acceptable.

The first signs that the influence of the Beats would last were in the 60s, when songwriters and bands were heavily influenced by the Beats' legacy. One very significant example of this was Bob Dylan who penned songs of protest influenced by Beat writers and culture, and he often cited Beat writers as influences (Allen Ginsberg even accompanied Bob Dylan on tour on one occasion). The Grateful Dead were also a product of Beat culture. They joined Ken Kesey and his Merry Band of Pranksters on a bus Kesey purchased called "Further". Further was driven by Neal Cassady as the bus traveled cross-country, while those riding it experimented with psychedelics and brought LSD to the mainstream. The Doors and the Velvet Underground are two other examples of bands influenced by the Beat Generation. Ray Manzarek, a member of The Doors, said that The Doors wouldn't have existed if not for *On the Road*. In a way, the Beats could also

be credited with influencing the spawn of these musical giants. The hippie movements of the 60s were led by the Beats, as the Beats changed what was allowed to be discussed socially or politically. It gave groups such as hippies and goths the space to have a voice, and led the way for a new anti-materialistic rebellion.

Beat Culture also had a resoundingly positive effect on civil rights. Ginsberg was a huge proponent of LGBT and sexual freedom, and brought the discussion of homosexuality to the table. He was a relevant member of the political arena far after the Beat generation had ended, as a figurehead in the gay rights movement and also protested against capitalism and the Vietnam War. Ginsberg differs greatly from the radical leftists of today, as he was far more anti-law and pro-freedom, whereas today's liberals look to the government for help and protection. In today's arena, he would likely be classified as a libertarian. Ginsberg coined the term "flower power," as he was a passionate advocate of values such as peace and love. He protested with tactics designed to act as a foil to the violence and darkness of the Vietnam War, and his followers would recite chants. He also claimed that psychedelics were on par with yoga and meditation in their potential to raise consciousness, and his opinion on such influenced the psychedelic movements to come. Kerouac and Ginsberg both had religious influences as well, given that they both studied Buddhism and eastern philosophies extensively, helping to bring meditation, yoga, and similar activities into the mainstream, as well as encouraging connection. *Dharma Bums* has extensive descriptions of the benefits of being at one with nature, and Kerouac consistently isolated himself in nature to temporarily find peace.

The Beat Generation still impacts modern society, and is the source of many free spirited and wild hedonistic ideals. The Beats unleashed a new American identity, one that emphasized the destruction of inhibitions and boundless thinking. It also, in a way, helped generations get back in touch with the original American Dream, one where freedom, community, and brotherhood were valued above materialism. Without the Beats, we wouldn't have Bob Dylan, The Beatles, The Grateful Dead, The Doors, or The Velvet Underground. Without the Beats, we wouldn't have made the same progress for the LGBT community. Without the Beats, we wouldn't have had the voice to protest the Vietnam War. Without the Beats, sexual repression would be far more prominent. Without the Beats, veterans with PTSD wouldn't have the opportunity to heal through psychedelics, and medical marijuana would not be a possibility. Without the Beat Generation, San Francisco would not be the artistic and progressive center that it is, and The Oxbow School likely would never have been established.

As powerful and positive an influence Beat writers were, it is important to take their works with a grain of salt. The idolization of such figures could prove harmful, as many of them had moments of very questionable ethical integrity. Kerouac was very misogynistic on several occasions, and did nothing about Neal Cassady's blatant disregard for the health of those around him. Kerouac's hedonistic behavior resulted in him dying far too young. Ginsberg was supportive of NAMBLA, which meant he was supportive of (and likely participated in) pedophilia, an incredibly troubling stance. He also was supportive of communist societies that had histories of severe oppression. Burroughs killed his wife, likely intentionally. He also lived a life full of drug use and unhealthy sexual behavior, likely including pedophilia and severe sexual assault, or rape. While society should recognize the positive influence these writers have had, we also must understand their flaws and separate the art from the artist.

This topic is extremely important to consider as it is representative of the way literature affects society, and the way media influences. Understanding the Beat Movement is also integral to understanding contemporary society, art, and aesthetics in modern society. It also helps us

practice a healthy level of iconoclasm, in such a way that we can take away and recognize the positive influences of our cultural predecessors while still learning from their mistakes and wrongdoing. The Beat writers and the ensuing counter-cultural leaders teach us to learn through doing and to value experience, as well as helping us learn to question and criticize society and authority instead of blindly following, because individuals do have the power to implement positive change.

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