Beat Movement Study Guide

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

The roots of the Beat literary movement go back to 1944 when Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs met at Columbia University in New York. It was not until the 1950s that these writers and other "Beats" would be recognized as a *movement* and as a *generation* of post-World War II youths whose attitudes and lifestyles were far removed from typical Americana. Kerouac used the term "beat" to describe both the negatives of his world and the positives of his responses to it. On one hand, "beat" implied weariness and disinterest in social or political activity, and on the other it was reminiscent of the Beatitudes of Jesus□declarations of blessedness and happiness uttered during the Sermon on the Mount. While certain measures of blissfulness□often drug-induced□may have applied to followers of the Beat Movement, so would feelings of disillusionment, bitterness, and an overwhelming desire to be free of social constraints.

The work of Beat writers is characterized by experimental styles and subjects, including spontaneous writing without regard for grammar, sexually explicit language, uninhibited discussion of personal experiences, and themes ranging from a rejection of American values and fear of nuclear war to sexual escapades and road trips. Representative works of the movement are Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch*, and poems such as Ginsberg's "Howl" and Gregory Corso's "BOMB." None of these works appeared on American bookshelves until nearly a decade after Kerouac first used the word "beat" to signify an outlook on writing and an outlook on life. What had begun as a small cluster of rebellious outcasts in New York City soon grew into a larger group based in San Francisco and eventually spread its influences across the country. Beats appeared everywhere in the 1950s, paving the way for the hippies of the following decade.

Themes

Disillusionment

At the end of World War II, Americans enjoyed a period of blissful relief and charged-up happiness unlike any realized before. Although an odd mixture of pride and sorrow over the dropping of atomic bombs left many people uneasy about the path to victory, it did not waylay the renewed spirit of optimism and drive for prosperity that swept the country at a feverish pace. The latter part of the 1940s and most of the 1950s have been called times of innocent fun, social quietude, and old-fashioned family values. The end of the war turned Rosie the Riveter into June Cleaver, as most women gave up their wartime jobs to raise the first of the baby boomers while dads worked as the sole breadwinners in the family. But, not everyone welcomed a neatly prescribed life with the perfect spouse, two kids, and a white picket fence around a well-manicured lawn. Some people were disillusioned with postwar complacency and protested social norms that smelled more like social control than simply a style of living. A faction of those people became self-identified members of the Beat Generation.

Disillusionment may be considered the "core" theme of the Beat Movement, for it encompasses the basic reason for the split from mainstream society that the original Beats desired. Although the foundations of the movement may be traced to the four kindred personalities of Kerouac, Burroughs, Corso, and Ginsberg, there is little doubt that countless other Americans were experiencing a shift in feelings in the wake of a war with unsurpassed technological destruction. To have the nation responsible then settle into an era of homeland peace, frivolity, and abundance was too much for some to swallow. People attracted to what would become the Beat lifestyle turned in that direction because of an initial distrust of America's renewed sense of pride and accomplishment, many fearing that a gratified society was a vulnerable one, left open to greater governmental and social control. Rather than be mollified by the quaintness of the average happy family in the average happy neighborhood, the disillusioned Beats struck out against such expected contentment in favor of being intentionally discontented.

Social Nonconformity

If disillusionment is a core theme of the Beat Movement, social nonconformity is another motif that directly resulted from it. Looking solely at the four major originators, one may assume that only criminals and drug addicts were true members of the Beat Generation. But, as tempting as it seems, that assumption is an unfair generalization of the entire group. Surely, most Beats visibly and vocally pronounced themselves social outsiders, but, for some, being different meant wearing a particular style of clothing, listening to jazz music improvisations, using hip language, and showing complete disinterest in social and political concerns. For others, nonconformity did entail a more reckless

lifestyle; from heavy use of alcohol and other drugs to theft, homicide, and gangster involvement, many took life to a steep extreme, and some, of course, fell over the edge.

The most common responses of nonconformity shared by both moderate and extremist Beats were a rejection of materialism, scoffing at traditional American values, and complete indifference toward social activism. At the same time, individual expression and personal enlightenment were highly regarded, and the pursuit of self-awareness often translated into free-spirited, spur-of-the-moment adventures across town or across the country. Obviously, some members of the Beat Generation had to maintain steady jobs, but mobility was key to staying clear of social constraints and circumscribed behavior. Perhaps the strongest statement of nonconformity expressed by this generation was to accept and, indeed, celebrate its description as "beat." The term essentially pointed a finger in society's face and said, "Look what you've done to us."

Spontaneity

While spontaneity is more an action than an idea, it has been called the primary virtue and a one-word summary of the Beat Movement. This theme more than any other speaks to the frenzied, intense emotional states that many Beats found both exhilarating and necessary. Moreover, it embodies the tendency not to think twice about hopping into a car and taking off for unknown destinations just for the thrill of adventure and the prospect of discovering something new about oneself and life in general. To be impulsive was not to be cautious. For the Beats, caution was a symptom of social conformity, and living off the cuff was an openly defiant response to such careful, regimented existence.

While living life as an unbridled, impetuous free spirit may seem harmless enough - even attractive, though most citizens would not admit it - spontaneity often manifested itself in dangerous activities for the Beat Generation that not only changed the rapid-fire lives of many, but also ended some. Indiscriminate sexual encounters with numerous partners, often strangers, were common among Beat followers, and these spontaneous acts occasionally led to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Physical pleasure also came in liquid form - whether whiskey to drink or heroin to inject, drugs flowed freely among the Beats, and the desire for an immediate rush far outweighed any concern about overdosing or even dying. The abuse of cigarettes and marijuana helped maintain a moderate high in between heavier drug trips, and the continuous search for sensory experiences was considered a justifiable reason for remaining open to spontaneous urges.

Style

The "Cut-Up" Technique

The "cut-up" technique of composing prose originated with Burroughs, and it was a spin-off of his unusual method of putting together his most famous novel, *Naked Lunch*, from snippets of notes he wrote down and then pieced together. His follow- up novels, *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, were constructed from chunks of various writings which he had literally cut up and then randomly paired into a new work. In doing so, he came up with such lines as the following: "He rents an amphitheater with marble walls he is a stone painter you can dig can create a frieze while you wait" and "The knife fell - The Clerk in the bunk next to his bled blue silence - Put on a clean shirt and Martin's pants - telling stories and exchanging smile - dusty motors," both from *Nova Express*. Once Burroughs introduced it, the cut-up style of writing became a hit with the Beats, and others experimented with it in poetry, essays, and even political speeches, just for fun. The typical method is to take a written page, cut it down the middle vertically, then cut each of those two pieces in half horizontally, so that there are four "chunks" of writing. Next, arrange the chunks in different pairs to see what new lines or phrases appear. Burroughs found the results refreshing, even when the pieced-together prose made little or no sense and could not be translated literally. This style protected against what he and other experimental writers considered the confining boundaries of traditional word usage and standard grammar. The cut-up style was as much a rebellion against language control as a quirky creative impulse, and Burroughs claimed rebellion was the more important factor.

Spontaneous Prose

While the cut-up technique may have been the strangest literary form spawned by the Beat Movement, another just as unusual for its time was what Kerouac called "spontaneous prose," and it became the most prominent and recognizable style of the Beats. As the name suggests, this type of writing is not plotted or preconceived in any way. Instead, it consists of a flow of thoughts, written down as it occurs in a continuous stream of images and movement. There is very little regard for punctuation, which threatens to get in the way of the lines' pulsing rhythm. Kerouac compared writing spontaneous prose to a jazz musician blowing on a horn, sometimes with long, drawn-out notes, other times in quick, snappy toots, but always creating rhythm through improvisation. As with proper grammar, a writer's consciousness is seen as a hindrance to spontaneity and should be avoided - that is, writing without consciousness is a must for the Beat writer. Yet another taboo is revision. Once the language has flowed directly from the mind to the paper, the writer should not go back and revise. To do so, of course, is to take the spontaneity out of spontaneous writing, and, for the Beat writer, that means ruining the work.

Contemporary Idiom

The Beat Generation did not invent writing in contemporary idiom, for novelists and poets throughout history often used a colloquial language with which to tell tales and give voice to characters, though often it was interspersed with more formal language from an objective narrator. The Beats, however, took the idiom of their generation to daring new levels with the inclusion of words and subject matter previously considered too immoral or illegal to print. But, Beat writers knew that if one was going to be truly spontaneous, then nothing could be held back. If the mind thought it, the hand should write it, and, obviously, the mind can entertain shocking, illicit, and highly personal material. The use of sexually explicit language, as well as forbidden four-letter words, became the norm in Beat writing, and this characteristic drew most of the negative attention to the movement's poets and novelists. While many critics of the outlandish new writing could overlook, or simply scoff at, odd techniques and their so-called unliterary results, most railed against the description of all kinds of sexual encounters in the language of the street. The protests were enough to keep some novels and poems off American bookshelves for years while publishers and authors endured obscenity trials, but, in the end, the use of contemporary idiom, even at its extreme, was deemed legal. By the twenty-first century, it was deemed literature.

Historical Context

The Beat Movement got its start in the late 1940s and began losing momentum by the early 1960s, but the entire decade in between was a bountiful time for Beats. The members of the movement, keenly aware of the realities of the time, were not lulled into the sentimentality commonly associated with the 1950s. There is a distinct irony about the decade that many Americans old enough to remember those years often overlook. The nostalgia that has become synonymous with it□convertibles and road trips, hula-hoops and Elvis, TV and the technology boom, and "I Like Ike" pins on the lapels of happy suburbanites□ tends to blur other events of the period that suggest anything but merriment and complacency. The Cold War with the Soviet Union, back yard bomb shelters, "duck and cover" exercises in grade school classrooms, the Communist revolution in Cuba, McCarthyism at home, and increased racial tensions all tell the story of a United States quite different from the wistful, fond memories that some older Americans still hold.

Although the United States and the Soviet Union had been allies in World War II, the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 resulted in Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power and his eventual strengthening of Soviet political and military control over Eastern Europe. Both the United States and the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons capabilities, and as tensions between the two world powers escalated, so did the buildup of arsenals on both sides. In the United States, personal tensions mounted as well, and some families constructed bomb shelters in their back yards while their children learned how to drop to the classroom floor and cover their heads in the event that bomb sirens sounded during school hours. In an attempt to improve relations, President Eisenhower and Khrushchev were to meet at a summit in Paris in 1959, but two weeks prior to the event, a U.S. spy plane was shot down over Russia. The summit still took place, but the Soviet leader stormed out before it was over, and another planned meeting between Khrushchev and Eisenhower in Moscow was canceled. Meanwhile, closer to home, Fidel Castro led a Communist revolution in Cuba and became that country's ruler in 1959.

The Cold War and the threat of real war was a major impetus behind Eisenhower's decision to launch the largest public works program in U.S. history□the construction of the Interstate Highway System, which would connect the nation coast to coast and provide emergency runways for military aircraft, as well as quicker evacuation routes. The use of major highways for war purposes never materialized, but the possibility of it was indicative of how threatened both the U.S. Government and the American people felt during the 1950s. Worries were not confined to the physical horrors of war, however. They also involved concerns about the Communist takeover of the United States. Nothing short of mass hysteria resulted when Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin began holding hearings on the alleged Communist infiltration of the U.S. military. McCarthy and his followers also began identifying as Communists people in other government agencies, as well as well-known people in the movie industry and professors at universities. The senator's accusations were groundless; nonetheless, reputations were ruined and esteemed professionals were blacklisted. McCarthy's frenzied heyday ended when Eisenhower, military officials, and members of the media

banded together to prove his "Red Scare" fraudulent. Ultimately, the senator was formally censured by Congress.

Many U.S. citizens feared being overcome by a foreign power. Those fears were not nearly as debilitating as problems Americans caused for themselves with racial intolerance and hatred. The 1950s saw the beginnings of one of the most significant movements of the century□the Civil Rights movement□ sparked by the Brown v. the Board of Education decision in 1954, which made racial segregation in schools illegal. Blacks began openly defying previous "separatist" rules, including such historical acts as Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat to a white man and move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. This one act initiated a yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, organized by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. After Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act in 1957, tensions mounted even further, and, in one instance, Governor George Wallace of Arkansas refused to protect black students entering Central High School in Little Rock. Eisenhower was forced to send federal troops to the site. For the rest of the decade and on into the 1960s, issues of racism and civil rights continued to divide the country, often at the expense of human life.

In spite of the obvious causes of fear and doubt that ran rampant throughout the United States during the 1950s, some Americans still lived and many tried to emulate the Ozzie and Harriet life they viewed on their prized new gadget, the television. Along with a fascination with TV came the new rage in dining□frozen TV dinners, often enjoyed directly in front of the box for which they were named. Americans who preferred even faster food began to experience a new chain of hamburgers called McDonald's, and poultry lovers learned that they could grab a quick meal at Kentucky Fried Chicken. The significant form of entertainment to emerge from the decade was rock and roll, and when Sun Records released Elvis Presley's first record in 1954, the music industry was changed permanently. Perhaps the most significant impact of an innovation on the American way of life was one originally considered a preventive military move. The tens of thousands of miles of highway constructed during this period put the country on the move. People drove. They bought stylish new automobiles and took lengthy family vacations across state or across country. Many moved to recently built suburbs and enjoyed the longer drive to work, and still others began shopping and frequenting establishments in places they would once have considered too distant. More than any other American "value," mobility was adopted by the Beat Generation as much as it was by the Ozzies and Harriets across the country. Although their reasons, purposes, and destinations may have been quite different, both groups found themselves happily on the road.

Movement Variations

Abstract Expressionism

While Beat writers were having their heyday throughout the 1950s, visual artists were also struggling against social conformity and the restrictions they felt postwar society placed on them with its expectations about art. What arose was a kind of "Beat" painting and sculpture that took the name "Abstract Expressionism," and its techniques and resulting works rocked the art world as much as Beat writing disturbed the literary scene.

A group of painters and sculptors known as the New York School led the Abstract Expressionism revolt by advocating individual emotions and the freedom to present those emotions with as little inhibition as possible. The idea was to make the art of the moment, just as Kerouac's spontaneous prose made literature of the moment. And like the Beat writers, abstract expressionists welcomed confrontation with a complacent society trying to settle into a safe, benign, middle-class life after World War II. There should be no complacency, according to the artists, and they rebelled against the image of the lofty painter standing at his easel overlooking a serene meadow and capturing the pastoral landscape on his canvas. Abstract expressionists often used huge canvases, and many rejected that conventional surface altogether. They used paper- mâché and three-dimensional objects as surfaces, and, in place of common artists' brushes and scrapers, they used spray cans, garden tools, sticks, and a variety of other objects to create their work. Even more outrageous, the abstract expressionists employed whatever material was convenient to incorporate into a piece of art□from broken glass and sand piles to toilet seats and garbage.

One major avant-garde artist of this period, Jackson Pollock, created "drip paintings" by literally holding a can of paint above a surface and letting it drip onto it. Pollock was also known for stepping back from a large canvas with his can in hand, then slinging it so that the paint splashed in wild streaks all over the surface. Robert Rauschenberg created what he called "combines," or artworks that integrated three-dimensional objects such as umbrellas, stuffed toys, and tires with other material. And in 1959, Claes Oldenburg walked through the streets of New York City wearing a paper-mâché elephant mask, his first one-man art show. Later, he collaborated with Coosje van Bruggen, his wife, to design and build huge public artworks of common objects, such as a giant clothespin in Philadelphia, big shuttlecocks strewn across the museum lawn in Kansas City, and a large spoon with a cherry perched on it in Minneapolis.

Music

When Cleveland disk jockey Alan Freed started using the term "rock and roll" in 1951, it was in reference to his radio show, "Moondog House Rock and Roll Party"; the music he was playing was rhythm and blues. By the end of the decade, however, those simple

yet volatile words were the signature label for a revolution in music that spawned singers as diverse as Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, the Bee Gees, and the Goo Goo Dolls, among others. But the Beat Movement promoted another type of music, almost a combination of rhythm and blues and what eventually became the thumping gyrations of rock and roll. It was a style of jazz called "bebop," and its artists were black musicians who played primarily in big-city nightclubs, some becoming famous recording artists such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker.

Bebop is a discordant, unmelodious, and syncopated music that arose from its musicians' desire to separate themselves from typical mainstream jazz and the predictable harmonies and rhythms of 1940s swing music. Like Beat writers and visual artists, bebop musicians were fiercely individualistic, and they proved it with wholly improvised solos and nontraditional rhythms that tended to change from performance to performance. Again, it was the freedom to create the music of the moment, and, while it enjoyed a solid audience that grew tremendously throughout the 1950s□particularly in large cities and bohemian pockets of smaller towns□bebop also offended the more traditional music lovers with its dissonant, if not cacophonous, instrumental sounds. But that, of course, suited bebop musicians just fine. As more and more people, both black and white, joined the ranks of bebop fans, the musicians found themselves having to reach even greater levels of musical dissonance just to maintain that rebellious, outsider edge.

Film

The Beat Movement in film encompassed a wide variety of forms: documentaries about the Beat Generation, movies based on the lives of the most prominent Beats, and movies based on their novels. Some films featured appearances by Beats who either played themselves or characters based on their own personalities, while other movies, without a direct Beat connection, had themes, characters, and subjects that showed obvious influence by the movement.

Pull My Daisy, which came out in 1959, is the only film that well-known Beat writers actually created themselves. As could be expected, it was a spontaneously arranged movie, derived from an unfinished play by Kerouac called *The Beat Generation*. The plot concerns Cassady and his wife Carolyn, who are trying to fit in with typical middle-class suburbanites only to have their Beat friends crash a sedate party and ruin the couple's reputation in the neighborhood. Among the actors are Ginsberg and Corso, and Kerouac provides a voice-over although he is never seen on screen.

Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*, made into a film and released in 1960, is based on incidents in the lives of Ginsberg, Corso, and Kerouac himself. Considered by Beats and non-Beats alike to be a bad attempt at making a "real" Hollywood movie, *The Subterraneans* was a box office flop, and today it is hardly remembered, even by movie buffs. A more successful Beat film did not appear until 1991 when *Naked Lunch* made it to the big screen, but it is a common misconception that the movie is based on Burroughs's novel. Instead, it is a semi-fantasy based on Burroughs's life during the

time in which he was writing the book. The "plot" refers to Burroughs's job as a pest exterminator, and scenes include people snorting or shooting up bug spray, typewriters coming to life as sexually charged insects, and an escape to Tangiers where the main character endures insect-filled nightmares and tries to write a book. The movie *Drugstore Cowboy*, released in 1989, featured an appearance by Burroughs himself who plays□as one may guess□a drug-addicted priest who knows more about the dope scene in Portland than anyone else in town. Both *Drugstore Cowboy* and *Naked Lunch* enjoyed moderate box office success. Documentaries about the Beat movement include *The Beat Generation* (1959), *The Beatniks* (1960), and *The Beats: An Existential Comedy* (1980). Films with indirect Beat connections include *American Pop* (1981), an animated film in which a rebellious son hears a reading of "Howl" and takes off on an adventure similar to Kerouac's in *On the Road*; *Hairspray* (1988) in which a Beatnik character reads "Howl" in order to frighten away a group of "squares"; and *Wild at Heart* (1990), which is based on a novel by Barry Gifford, who coauthored *Jack's Book*, an oral biography about Kerouac.

Representative Authors

William Burroughs (1914-1997)

William Burroughs was born February 5, 1914, in St. Louis, to well-to-do parents with a family history of successful business ventures. But even as a youth, Burroughs did not fit in with his upper-class, Midwestern background, for he was a bookish boy with homosexual tendencies and a fascination with guns and lawlessness. Burroughs was a top student and eventually earned a degree from Harvard, though he never lost his attraction to crime. In 1943, Burroughs moved to New York to become involved in the city's gangster underworld, which led to his experimentation with heroin and several run-ins with the law. There, Burroughs also met Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, two members of a small group of social nonconformists at Columbia University who would become major players in the Beat Movement. Also at Columbia, Burroughs met Joan Vollmer, who became his common-law wife, gave birth to their son, and found herself on the wrong end of one of Burroughs's pistols.

Although he was usually surrounded by literary types, Burroughs did not start writing until 1950 when he decided to write a semi-autobiographical story, *Junkie*. Without finishing the first novel, he began another in 1951, this one also somewhat autobiographical, titled *Queer*. By this time, he had moved his family to Mexico to escape drug charges. It was there that he accidentally killed his wife by attempting to shoot a glass off her head, William Tell-style. Later, Burroughs confessed that it was Joan's death that gave him the incentive to pursue writing seriously.

Throughout the 1950s, Burroughs continued to write, but his material was generally considered too obscene for print. Finally, in 1959, his most famous book, *The Naked Lunch*, was published in Paris. Three years later, it was published in the United States as simply *Naked Lunch*. This book brought celebrity to Burroughs, though mostly among the underground, and he went on to write several more books, plays, and film scripts and to receive an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1975. Although many do not consider him one of the original Beat writers, he is now often called one of the most popular. Both his writing style and lifestyle were undeniably characteristic of the movement, but his work has found an even greater audience in more recent decades. Burroughs died in Lawrence, Kansas, August 2, 1997.

Neal Cassady (1926-1968)

Neal Cassady was born February 8, 1926, in Salt Lake City and grew up in a poor section of Denver with an alcoholic father. Cassady learned quickly how to fight and how to steal, and, perhaps most importantly, how to charm people while he was doing it. After years in and out of reform schools and juvenile prisons, Cassady developed the instincts of a con artist and the rebellion of a freespirited, fun-loving bum who wanted only to travel, ramble on in stream-of-consciousness conversations, and have sex with

whomever seemed the most beneficial partner at the moment. Essentially, it was Cassady's personality that was his major contribution to the Beat Movement. Though his autobiography was published in 1971 followed by some collections of letters, he never produced a single book while the Beat Movement was in full swing.

Cassady wound up in New York in 1946 where, through a friend at Columbia, he met Ginsberg and Kerouac. Ginsberg was promptly captivated by his western ruggedness and cowboy nature, and the two became lovers even while Cassady carried on various affairs with women, whom he claimed to prefer. But, it was his relationship with Kerouac that made Cassady one of the most influential instigators of the Beat Generation. In the late 1940s, the two went on a series of car trips across the United States, and these often harrowing, always riotous adventures became the basis for Kerouac's most famous book, *On the Road*. Kerouac captured Cassady's "voice" in the novel, essentially writing it the way Cassady talked: fast, off the cuff, without any hesitation or self-consciousness. The two travelers eventually parted, but Cassady continued his road adventures, winding up in Mexico in the late 1960s. There, after a night of too much alcohol, Cassady wandered out into the cold and rain and passed out. He slipped into a coma and died the following day, February 4, 1968.

Gregory Corso (1930-2001)

Gregory Corso was born March 26, 1930, in New York City. Of the writers who became famous among the Beats, Corso had one of the most natural poetic talents: he was capable of producing powerful lyric verse in an expressive, yet genuine voice, as well as bawdy, poetic ramblings, typically uninhibited and sexually explicit□hallmarks of Beat writing. Corso published his first volume of poetry, *The Vestal Lady on Brattle and Other Poems*, in 1955 and his second, *Gasoline*, in 1958. Also in 1958, Corso published a broadside of one of his most famous poems, "BOMB," which was a love poem to the atomic weapon, written in the shape of a mushroom cloud. He became immediately popular with fellow Beat writers and with mainstream readers as well, but the popularity he enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s dwindled over the decades. Still, he continued to write and publish and received the Jean Stein Award for Poetry from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1986. His most recent publication was *Mindfield: New and Selected Poems*, published in 1989 and reprinted in 1998. Corso died from prostate cancer in Minneapolis on January 17, 2001.

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)

Allen Ginsberg was born June 3, 1926, in Paterson, New Jersey, and grew up a shy, sensitive boy in a highly chaotic household. His father was a poet, teacher, and Jewish Socialist, and his mother was a radical Communist and unconstrained nudist with symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. Her bouts with mental illness weighed heavily on the young Ginsberg, as he was often the only one she trusted when the rest of the world was, in her mind, plotting against her. But Ginsberg had another struggle with which to contend□his sexual orientation to boys was another issue he faced.

Ginsberg took his father's advice to study labor law at Columbia. Although he had shown an interest in poetry previously, it was not until he met fellow student Kerouac and nonstudents Burroughs and Cassady that he turned his attention to literary pursuits. His friendship with these three and others among the rebel crowd had other influences as well: drugs, crime, and opportunities to express his homosexuality freely. Ginsberg was eventually suspended from Columbia. By then he was writing poetry profusely though not publishing much. His break came in 1955 when he joined other Beat poets for a public reading in San Francisco and delivered a resounding performance of what became his trademark poem, "Howl." Just as Kerouac's *On the Road* was the symbolic novel of the Beats, "Howl" was□and probably still is□the symbolic poem. Ginsberg's popularity was almost instantaneous after this reading, and his first collection, *Howl and Other Poems*, was published in 1956. Other books followed in a relatively short period, and Ginsberg's fame and infamy grew. Despite an obscenity trial for "Howl," (which was eventually declared not obscene), he found recognition among the prestigious literary mainstream and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1963. In 1969, he received a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and, in 1974, a National Book Award for *Fall of America*. Ginsberg published poetry collections throughout the 1980s and 1990s, most recently *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems, 1986-1992* and *Selected Poems 1947-1995*. Ginsberg died of a heart attack while suffering from liver cancer, April 5, 1997, in New York City.

Jack Kerouac (1922-1969)

Jack Kerouac was born March 12, 1922, in Lowell, Massachusetts. His father was a successful printer in Lowell, but by the mid-1920s, the economy of the city began to collapse, and the older Kerouac turned to gambling in hopes of supplementing his income. Young Jack was already interested in creating stories, inspired by radio talk shows, but he was also a star player on his high school football team. When Kerouac was awarded a football scholarship to play at Columbia, his family moved to New York with him. But at the university, Kerouac fell in with the renegade crowd, including Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Cassady, and he had a fight with his coach who, afterwards, refused to let him play. Eventually, he dropped out of Columbia, bitterly disappointing his family.

As a student, Kerouac had begun writing a novel, and his new friends praised his work. With Ginsberg's promotional help, Kerouac's first book, *The Town and the City*, was published in 1950, gaining him respect as a writer but not bringing him fame. Throughout the 1950s, Kerouac wrote novels that went unpublished for a time, including *Dr. Sax* and *The Subterraneans*, interspersed with his cross-country adventures with Cassady. But, one book that resulted from those travels put him on the map as one of the most□if not the most□significant writer of the Beat Movement: *On the Road*, published in 1957, was an immediate success. It was Kerouac who had coined the term "beat" to reflect both the downtrodden, world-weary attitudes of the post-World War II generation and, at the same time, the optimistic, "beatific" will to live unconstrained by social conventions. His own life certainly reflected these definitions, particularly the former, and he had difficulty tolerating his sudden stardom. He turned to alcohol for

consolation and escape but was never able to control the drinking and manage a writing career at the same time. His last somewhat successful novel, *Big Sur*, was published in 1962. His health destroyed by alcohol, Kerouac died of a stomach hemorrhage in St. Petersburg, Florida, October 21, 1969.

Representative Works

"BOMB"

Corso's most famous poem, "BOMB," was originally published as a "broadside," a single large sheet of paper printed on one side, by City Lights Books in 1958. It then appeared in Corso's 1960 collection, *The Happy Birthday of Death*. Arranged in the shape of a mushroom cloud, the poem is Corso's ironic attempt to mitigate the destruction of an atomic war by portraying the bomb-drop as a Christlike second coming. Essentially, the explosion marks the end of human history and the beginning of heavenly eternity. Although the theme is dark and chilling, Corso presents it in typical Beat style with a rush of fragmented images, raw language, and a wry sense of humor. It is primarily the latter attribute that turned off many wouldbe supporters. With lines such as, "I sing thee Bomb Death's extravagance Death's jubilee / . . . to die by cobra is not to die by bad pork," Corso offended members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when he read the poem at New College in Oxford in 1958. The crowd heckled him. Some reviewers were kinder, however, expressing appreciation for the extraordinary imagery in "BOMB" and declaring the bizarre humor right on target with the Beat attitude. Critics on either side would have to admit that the poem brought Corso to the front of the Beat literary movement, although his work is probably least remembered.

A Coney Island of the Mind

A Coney Island of the Mind is one of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's most well-received collections of poems, selling over one million copies since its publication in 1958. Popular among the Beats as a publisher and owner of City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, Ferlinghetti solidified his recognition as a poet with this book, in which the poems present a kaleidoscopic view of the world as a place with discontinuous images and a carnival-like absurdity. When Ferlinghetti did public readings from this collection, he was usually accompanied by jazz music in the background, and many of the poems themselves have a spontaneous rhythm and obvious cadence. *Coney Island* found an audience with both Beat and mainstream readers, as well as critics from both sides. Most cite similar reasons: even though the central theme of the collection may be the meaninglessness of life, individual poems still intrigue readers with poignant, definable thoughts.

The Dharma Bums

Published in 1958, Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums* is based on his friendship with poet Gary Snyder and a mountain-climbing trip they took to Yosemite in 1955. Snyder, portrayed as Japhy Ryder in the book, is known for both his Beatstyle poetry and his serious study of Zen Buddhism. Like Kerouac's *On the Road*, published a year earlier,

The Dharma Bums recounts the raucous adventure of two friends with rambling details and spontaneous confessions, but its greatest significance is the symbolic search for spiritual enlightenment that the friends' trip represents. While the characters in much of Kerouac's other work go on wild journeys as a means to escape life and to run away from themselves, here Japhy and Ray Smith (Kerouac) set out in search of dharma, or supreme truth, in an effort, essentially, to find themselves. Despite the turnabout in themes, *The Dharma Bums* was well received as an archetype of Beat ideology, heralding a discontent with standard values and the quest to find something more satisfying for the spirit, as well as for the mind and body.

"Howl"

The opening lines of Ginsberg's lengthy poem "Howl," published in *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956, are some of the most recognized in twentieth- century poetry: "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." Dedicated to Carl Solomon, a lifelong friend whom Ginsberg met at the Columbia University Psychiatric Institute in 1948, "Howl" is a three-part, free verse lamentation on the social and personal woes of post-World War II American society. Part I describes the despair felt by many individuals during this unsettling era; Part II identifies social conformity, big government, and materialism as some of the causes for human discontent and restlessness; and Part III is a series of statements directly addressing Solomon, praising true friendship and announcing the poet's feeling of victory over social control of his emotional and sexual identity.

Today, "Howl" is widely considered to be the most important poem to come out of the Beat Movement, with some critics claiming it revolutionized American poetry in general. There were those who felt the same way in the 1950s, but there were also many who would have preferred to see Ginsberg's work burned instead of read. The sexually explicit language, mostly homosexual in nature, shocked readers and critics alike. The San Francisco Police Department was not impressed either, and authorities, declaring the work obscene, promptly arrested its publisher, Ferlinghetti. During the obscenity trial, several well-known and well-respected poets testified in support of Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, and the freedom of poetry in general, and they eventually succeeded in persuading the judge. "Howl" was declared not obscene, and the notoriety of the trial greatly enhanced its popularity, as well as sales of the book.

Naked Lunch

Burroughs's most widely known novel, *Naked Lunch*, was not published in the United States until 1962 when it was finally declared not obscene following three years of legal trials. A publisher in Paris had accepted it in 1959. While thousands of people can claim they have read the book, few may be able to say they know what it is about, for *Naked Lunch* has no consistent story, no running narrative, no uniform point of view, and no readily recognizable theme. Loosely, it tells the tale of junkie William Lee and a

hodgepodge of grotesque characters who flail about in a bleak, sadistic world of drug addiction, sexual depravity, and madness. The subject matter, such as it is, is not what made this book one of the hallmarks of the Beat literary movement. Rather, it is the style, or the origins of its style, that piqued readers' curiosity and brought critical attention□negative as much as positive□ to Burroughs's creation.

Naked Lunch is composed of a series of random sketches and rambling notes. Burroughs wrote hundreds of snippets while living in Tangiers, and, with the help of writer friends Kerouac and Ginsberg, among others, he haphazardly assembled the pieces and presented them to a publisher, claiming however the publisher stacked the pages on his desk would be just as suitable a way to publish them as any. As a result, one can actually read *Naked Lunch* front to back, back to front, or any direction coming and going. It was this seeming lack of true literary endeavor as well as talent that irked many reviewers of Burroughs's work. Some claimed it took no intelligence to create the so-called novel and even less to read it. In spite of the harsh, even insulting criticism, *Naked Lunch* became a national best-seller and sealed its author's literary reputation, for better or for worse.

On the Road

Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, published in 1957, has been called the quintessential work of the Beat Movement. Like many of his other works, this book draws on the author's own experiences and relationships, and its characters are derived from real people. In this case, the two central players are Sal Paradise, based on Kerouac himself, and Dean Moriarty, based on his free-spirited, rabble-rousing companion, Cassady. *On the Road* chronicles the cross-country road trips of Paradise and Moriarty, symbolizing their fervent search for values greater than those they consider typically American. What results is perhaps most emblematic of the Beat Generation's feelings of detachment and dissatisfaction. Instead of finding the values they seek, Paradise and Moriarty become saturated in drugs, alcohol, sex, and crime□all leading to disjointedness and a scattering of their lives amidst the chaos. Many Beats considered this book their anthem because they could so strongly identify with the cycle of hope and disappointment that endlessly revolves throughout its pages. General readers tended to find the work amusing, if not enjoyable, and critics tended to be split down the middle. Some praised *On the Road* for giving voice to an entire generation of disenchanted, embittered Americans, and others denounced it as an illiterate, incoherent exercise in self-absorption and self-pity. Like other controversial Beat material, Kerouac's work outlasted the worst criticism and wound up in the annals of prominent American literature. *On the Road* was, and still is, an exceptional work, as much for its style as for its message.

Critical Overview

Criticism of the Beat Movement was initially almost as divided as the Beats themselves were from mainstream American society. While there was little disagreement that the Beat Generation had indeed caused a stir with its literature, art, and music, supporters and detractors argued mostly about the true artistic value of the methods and the results. The prevalent negative critique claimed, simply, that their writings were not literature. Beat writers were attacked for their disregard for proper grammar and their often incoherent, rambling prose that seemed accessible only to its authors. Supporters, however, found the strange styles and shocking subjects refreshing and justified the creative techniques as valid reactions to a humdrum, conservative mainstream. Decades after their fading away□and after the beatniks and hippies of the 1960s, disco freaks of the 1970s, and "me" generation of the 1980s□ a more objective criticism emerged.

Recent Beat Movement reviewers have largely put aside the debate over what was real writing talent and what was not in order to concentrate on why the movement began in the first place and what influence it had on its own generation and those that followed. In his 1992 publication of *Understanding the Beats*, author Edward Halsey Foster claims that "writing was for the Beats a means through which the self might be redeemed, or at the very least a place where its redemption might be recorded." Foster went on to rationalize the unorthodox writing style as "a literature through which the individual could flourish beyond all factionalism, all ideologies." This philosophical contention echoes many critics' hindsight summaries of what the Beat Movement was all about. Most now agree that there was merit after all in its writings and other artistic expressions. Perhaps Steven Watson says it best in his response to Kerouac's historical definition of the Beat Generation as those who "espouse mystical detachment and relaxation of social and sexual tensions," a description the Beat icon provided for *Random House Dictionary*. In *The Birth of the Beat Generation*, published in 1995, Watson says that "As the twentieth century draws to a close, the Beat Generation has outlived that historical moment, surviving notoriety and media blitz to become classic literature for succeeding generations."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill explores how the fractured, volatile lives of the primary Beat writers translated directly into the fractured, volatile works they produced.

The clearest dividing line between reviewers who praise the volumes of poetry, novels, stories, and essays from the Beat Movement and those who do not is the disagreement over what is real literature and what is not. Beat writers themselves did not make the decision easy, and most probably did not care at the time, nor would they care today. Indifference was "where it was at." Yet, like it or not, the originators of the movement became famous, even sporadically wealthy, but they often had problems handling the popularity, as well as the money. To be "normal" was not an option, and their work needed to reflect that. As a result, the writing was unorthodox, controversial, outlandish, and shocking, at least for that time. But were the styles, themes, and subjects wholly premeditated and cheaply contrived or could they be helped, considering the personal lives of the authors? Probably no other so-called "movement" of writers was as directly related to life experiences as the one coined "Beat," and a discussion of the movement is inseparable from a discussion of its authors. Few in number and relatively short in staying power, the Beat Generation produced the only kind of writing its members could have mustered.

There is little disagreement over the small number of main players who could legitimately call themselves Beats. Corso claimed the movement consisted only of Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and himself, and that four people did not even make up a "generation." In *The Birth of the Beat Generation*, author Steven Watson says that "By the strictest definition, the Beat Generation consists of only William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Herbert Huncke, with the slightly later addition of Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky." Corso may not have appreciated his placement as a "slightly later addition," but Watson's list is still small, no matter how the names are juggled. Moreover, the people behind the names appear to have had life's cards stacked against them from the beginning. Violent childhoods, broken families, bizarre fascinations, and no regard for personal health are the common experiences and common attitudes of the Beats, and their writing was little more than a public explosion of private fireworks. Considering that all survived their beginnings to become internationally known, the volatile foundations of these writers are worth a look.

Without doubt, Burroughs was oddest of them all. Typical, brief biographies neglect to mention that he began investigating methods of forging hard metals for weapons when he was eight years old; that he built homemade bombs as a teenager, one of which blew up in his hands, sending him to the hospital for six months, and another which he tossed through a window of his school principal's house; that, also as a teenager, he ingested a bottle of chloral hydrate and nearly died; that he almost killed a college classmate when he aimed at the fellow's stomach but ended up blowing a hole in his dorm room wall; that he severed the tip of his little finger with a pair of poultry sheers in

protest of his first male lover's infidelity. All this by the time he was twenty-five. Burroughs's adulthood in New York and elsewhere is more documented than his childhood and adolescence, but it too rings of the same macabre fascinations and dangerous activities that enveloped his early years. The writing he did as both a youth and as an adult reflects his morbid obsessions and ghoulish practices, as well as his blatant disregard for laws and social mores. How aptly named is the "cut-up" technique for an author whose own mind and body consistently felt the puncturing and rending of a base, depraved, and fractured existence.

Another prominent Beat writer, Corso, also grew up with violence, although initially he was not the one asking for it, as it seems Burroughs was. After his mother abandoned him at the age of six months, Corso was placed in foster homes, living with three sets of parents in ten years. At twelve, he stole a radio from a neighbor and was sentenced to juvenile detention, the first of many run-ins with the law. In detention, the young Corso endured so many beatings that, in desperation, he rammed his hands through a window and was sent to the children's psychiatric ward at Bellevue hospital. After another stint in a boys' home, he wound up living on the street, where he honed his theft skills. At sixteen, he and two other street kids robbed a finance company of $7,000, and all of them went to prison. Corso was released at age twenty when he headed to New York and met the other members of the Beat Generation.

Ginsberg's childhood was not filled with as much personal violence as was Burroughs's and Corso's, but it was just as torn though in a different direction. Bouts with schizophrenia landed his mother in a sanatorium when Ginsberg was only three years old, and she was in and out of institutions for the rest of her life. Being without his mother for extended periods of time was hard on the boy, but being with her proved even more challenging. When she was home, Naomi Ginsberg went on vocal tirades in support of Communism and insisted on walking around naked. She forced her son to listen to her paranoid fantasies, including her fear that Ginsberg's father was poisoning their food, that she had to cover her ears with kitchen pots to ward off evil, and that there were insects threatening to take over their home. Ginsberg began to console himself with two primary comforts: writing and sexual fantasies. He became consumed with both and often melded the two in his secret diary. His well-publicized work as an adult is proof that he never got over it.

By comparison to his three main cohorts, Kerouac seems to have led an almost normal childhood, but normal is definitely a relative term. At age four, Kerouac endured the death of his nine-year-old brother, and he clung to his Catholic teachings with fanatical adherence, believing in visions of ghosts and statues whose heads could move on their own. A shy loner, Kerouac turned to writing and used the prose process as a means of sexual stimulation. Writing himself into a frenzy, so to speak, remained a habit, if not trademark, throughout his adult writing career. So too did the alcoholism he picked up from his father. Perhaps more so than the others, Kerouac tried to live a valid "literary" life, but there were too many obstacles in the way, many of which he created himself.

These biographical summaries obviously portray the worst of their authors' lives and, admittedly, they lean to the darker side for a purpose. To address Beat writing is to

address Beat writers, and, while there are numerous other published Beats, the four mentioned here are considered the core group. There are also numerous other writers of all genres, all decades, all centuries whose lives were surely as violent, despairing, eerie, and dreadful as those described here, so what is the difference? What makes the Beat Movement so intrinsically tied to the similar quirks and experiences of the people involved? First, size. Even if one extends the circle of Beat writers beyond the Columbia group, beyond Greenwich Village, across the country to San Francisco, the number of members is still fewer than that of other well recognized literary movements. Extending the circle, however, is generally artificial, for a discussion of the Beats always returns to the handful of original members. Second, the personalities and resulting behavior of those members play a significant role in shaping the movement, as well as in confining it to a tight space in literary history. Most important, the writers themselves incite the debate on whether the word "literary" should even apply to their works.

Those who fare best in the debate are the poets. Generally given more license to experiment with styles and to ignore rules of syntax and grammar, poets Ginsberg and Corso tended to be criticized more for their subjects than their presentations. Explicit sexual references and anti- American pronouncements overshadowed the often incoherent, rambling lines and forced imagery. The prose writers were measured - and still are - with a different yardstick. Is cutting up pages of someone else's words and randomly splicing them together to create one's own work really "writing?" Even when individuals slice and shuffle their own words, is that literature? Regarding spontaneous writing, does it take real talent to sit at a typewriter and tap out every thought that comes to mind without any regard for plot, cohesion, readability, or an interesting subject? In the 1950s, many people answered no to all these questions. Hindsight, however, has been kinder. Now, critics are tempted to judge the products of the Beats based on nonliterary facets such as cultural restrictions and postwar fears. The Beats, it seems, are now praised for the very practices that condemned them fifty years ago. A complacent, smug America needed a good shaking, and the Beats provided it. The question remains: did they provide it through good writing?

That question will not be answered here or anywhere else. Like any "art" debate, it comes down to personal opinion. Perhaps the more intriguing point to ponder is whether the main writers of the Beat Generation - those who gave it both voice and a name - were only imitating their broken, scattered, "beat" lives with the works they produced. And further, could they have produced anything else? The contention here is no. The Beats wrote what they wrote because they lived how they lived. Rebels produce rebellious work - the more dissenting the lifestyle, the more defiant the writing. It is hard to imagine a Burroughs or a Ginsberg writing like William Faulkner or Robert Frost, or even like Norman Mailer or Gary Snyder, for that matter. While these writers and poets and countless others could surely be called defiant or even shocking by certain audiences, the Beats wore their pain, anger, criminality, and deviance on their sleeves like well-earned badges. They displayed grim personal lives openly through their actions and even more deeply through the words they put on paper.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on the Beat Movement, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Davenport explores sexuality and gender within the Beat movement.

On a lovely autumn day in 1987, I walked into the office of an English professor I had taken a course with the year before, one of the most influential and widely quoted literary historians in the country, the first woman to be appointed an editor for either of the major Norton anthologies, in her case *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, an Americanist who, despite the title of her contentious essay "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Theory," was at that point doing what she had always been doing: important feminist work. Five years later, much of that work - "The Madwoman" and thirteen of her other most important essays - would be collected and published under the title *Feminism and American Literary History*.

On that lovely autumn day, there in her spacious office - she was then the Director of the School of Humanities - I asked her if she would direct my dissertation. "What's it going to be about?" she asked. "Jack Kerouac," I ventured. She looked at me. I looked at me, too. I don't remember much about the short conversation that ensued except that she insisted upon my dissertation not becoming, as she put it, "some big macho trip."

Fast-forward to a less lovely March afternoon in 1994. Though I had a full-time, albeit non-tenure track, job at a nearby college, I was driving the same piano truck I had been driving since I had begun my Kerouac project, moving the same pianos with the same guys in the same way for the same few extra dollars. Aware that I had been recently divorced, one of those same guys, the only one not to be completing or defending a dissertation or turning one into a book and whining about each or all of those steps, asked me how things were going. I told him I was looking forward to a road trip north to deliver a paper at a conference. "What's it about?" he asked. "It's for AMSA, the American Men's Studies Association, and it's called '"Putting My Queer Shoulder to the Wheel"': The Beat Reinscription of Cultural and Literary Diversity.'" "Hey," he cautioned me, "that sounds politically incorrect on two counts." An alumnus of the same university laboratory high school that has produced more than one Nobel Prize winner and exactly one George Will, Ken seized the opportunity. "First," he said, "you're not gay. And, second, that sounds like a deeply reactionary group." He looked at me. I looked at my hands at ten and two on the wheel.

Autobiographical hors d'oeuvres like the two served above are common enough. They entertain; they instruct. They build community; they serve as confession. In the act of baring ourselves - or getting, as Beat poet Allen Ginsberg would say, "naked" - we simultaneously proclaim our differences and reveal our similarities. If Ginsberg were to walk into an AMSA conference session and repeat his celebrated gesture of disrobing in public and those of us attending the session were to follow suit by unsuiting, we would see simple theme and variation at work. If we chose instead to sit fully clothed in a circle and tell our stories, reveal ourselves for good and bad, in all our ugly beauty, we would be practicing the same "nakedness" that Ginsberg practiced and promoted.

Aside from everything else they might bare about me, the two stories that open this essay - the first about an influential mentor who happens to be a woman, the second about a concerned friend who happens to be a man - suggest an uneasiness about the way in which I position myself in relation not just to the Beat movement that Kerouac and Ginsberg served as figureheads, but also to the men's movement. The larger story that this essay builds is a cautionary tale about the liberation of post-WWII America from the constrictions of what Paul Goodman referred to at the time as "the Organized System." As with any American story about the human desire for self-expression in the face of conformity - or, at its most basic, life in the face of death - the identification of a primary liberator or liberating force is as historically reductive as it is culturally familiar.

Yet, if we want to write a story of cultural liberation in postwar America, culminating in the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, the women's movement, as well as the men's movement, we would do well to begin with the Beats, who "act[ed] out a critique of the organized system that everybody in some sense agree[d] with." The Beat critique provided, according to John Tytell "the confirmation that America was suffering a collective nervous breakdown in the fifties, and that a new nervous system was a prerequisite to perception." The rewiring of America called for, as it usually does, a redefinition of what it means to be American. The Beats, to their credit, were active agents in that rewiring, no matter how sloppy the job in its early stages. This essay describes the job the Beat movement - arguably, postwar America's first men's movement - did and the bits of rewiring it left undone for later movements.

In the Beat aesthetic, the body and the word are inseparable. Among the "best minds" of Ginsberg's generation, as he announced on that most famous of Beat nights, the October 13, 1955, Six Gallery poetry reading of "Howl," were those "who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts" (line 35). "'Open form,'" he later said, "meant 'open mind.'" In a short how-to called "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Jack Kerouac argued for the same kind of openness, a nakedness he associated with birthing imagery:

[W]rite outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral
release and exhaustion. . . Never afterthink
to "improve" or defray impressions, as, the best writing
is always the most painful personal wrungout
tossed from cradle warm protective mind . . . always
honest, . . . spontaneous, "confessional" interesting,
because not "crafted."

In theory, then, "afterthinking" or "crafting" is a life-denying impulse or act. In closing form, we close minds; in discouraging diversity, we encourage dishonesty; in limiting variation, we impoverish theme; in differentiating between genitals and manuscripts or the body and the word, we weaken our creative and procreative capacity. We kill, in other words, the potential in art, in life, in our individual and communal selves when we separate the body and the word or, put differently, the material and the spiritual.

Autobiography and spontaneity, body and word, genitals and manuscripts - all of these elements are central to the Beat aesthetic. One evening in 1955, as Kerouac waited for him, Ginsberg grabbed a pencil and in twenty minutes turned an experience he had shared with Kerouac earlier that day into a now often anthologized poem called "Sunflower Sutra." If the story is true, Ginsberg composed the poem at a rate of more than one word every other second for twelve hundred seconds. Even if the story is only partly true, the final line is a powerful example of the Beat aesthetic:

We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread
bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we're all golden
sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy
naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad
black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by
our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive
riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown
visions.

Spontaneously composed autobiographical art as material as it is spiritual. In short, body and word.

Perhaps the strongest, clearest expression of our individual and communal need to keep body and word linked lies in our autobiographical impulse, our drive to reinvent ourselves, our "hairy naked accomplishment-bodies," with each story we tell. As both of the recent Jungian best sellers - Robert Bly's (1990) *Iron John: A Book about Men* and Clarissa Pinkola Estes' (1992) *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* - demonstrate, the need to tell such stories crosses gender lines. And as the Murphy Brown episode in which a group of men struggle unsuccessfully to keep Murphy from entering their circle and seizing their talking-stick reminds us, men and women will and do cross artificially imposed gender lines regardless of interference.

Twenty-three years ago, the first hardcover textbook devoted to feminist literary criticism, Susan Koppleman Cornillon's (1972) *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, was published. A collection of essays, it included one by Florence Howe, who had just finished heading up the Modern Language Association's 1969-1971 Commission on Women and would soon become MLA's president. Making one of feminism's most important arguments - that no account, critical or literary, is ever disinterested - Howe called on autobiography as a starting point: "I begin with autobiography because it is there, in our consciousness about our own lives, that the connection between feminism and literature begins." It is also there - in autobiography - that masculinity and literature connect.

Certainly both of the two major publishing events in Beat history, Ginsberg's (1956) *Howl and Other Poems* and Kerouac's (1957) *On the Road*, stressed just that: that the line between life and literature is autobiography. In foregrounding "our consciousness about our own lives," the Beats walked that line, one that led naturally to what is arguably their primary cultural contribution: their interest in and promotion of diversity.

Arguably the best summation of the Beats' cultural critique is the close of Ginsberg's (1956) "America":

I'd better get right down to the job.
It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn
lathes in precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted
and psychopathic anyway.
America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the
wheel.

Fearing a postwar encroachment of homogeneity, these "naked angels," as John Tytell called them, consistently celebrated heterogeneity. They sent out for instance, an early call for multiculturalism, they decried the loss of regional diversity, and they publicly approved of homosexuality long before Stonewall. Everyone's "hairy naked accomplishment- body" needed to be blessed: everyone's story needed to be reinscribed in the "hairy naked accomplishment-body" of America itself if America was to realize its own "golden sunflower" by living up to its promise as the great social experiment of modern times. The "queer shoulder" of Ginsberg's challenge began autobiographically with Ginsberg himself, a homosexual, Jewish, Russian-American child of a Socialist father and a Communist mother, and if he was not really "psychopathic," he certainly did a turn in the Columbian Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute. The less literal "shoulder" Ginsberg wanted admitted to the "wheel" was the Demonized Other, the Unassimilated American. Kerouac's primary idea of the Other was what he called the "fellaheen" (i.e., Mexicans, Native Americans, and African Americans); William Burroughs' list began with petty thieves and drug addicts.

According to Burroughs, the third of the three major Beat figures, America was in fact ready for a sea change:

Once started, the Beat movement had a momentum
of its own and a world-wide impact. . . . The Beat literary
movement came at exactly the right time and
said something that millions of people of all nationalities
all over the world were waiting to hear. You
can't tell anybody anything he doesn't know already.
The alienation, the restlessness, the dissatisfaction
were already there waiting when Kerouac pointed out
the road.

Artists to my mind are the real architects of change....
Art exerts a profound influence on the style of life,
the mode, range and direction of perception. . . . Certainly
On the Road performed that function in 1957
to an extraordinary extent. There's no doubt that
we're living in a freer America as a result of the Beat
literary movement, which is an important part of the
larger picture of cultural and political change in this

country during the last forty years, when a four letter word couldn't appear on the printed page, and minority rights were ridiculous.

Women's rights were also "ridiculous," but they get no mention here. That should come as no surprise, considering Burroughs' very public stance as a misogynist. In an interview published in 1974, Burroughs blames Western dualism on the creation of women: "I think they were a basic mistake and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error." If women are the result of a key creational error, they are also, as Burroughs adds, at the root of a national problem: "America is a matriarchal, white supremacist country. There seems to be a definite link between matriarchy and white supremacy." For Burroughs, then, woman is the Ultimate Other, both Demonized and Demonizing, for she carries with her into the universe the basic concept of difference and perpetuates it in America with her role in race relations. She is, in other words, the Other who (m)others Others, a perfect queer-shoulder machine.

But what of the Beat movement in general? Were women to be included in the roll call of Others who might conceivably put their "queer" shoulders to the wheel? Were their "hairy naked accomplishment-bodies," their stories, their body and word to be included in the rewiring of America that the Beat critique called for?

The issue of voice is a central one in Joyce Johnson's (1983/1984) *Minor Characters: The Romantic Odyssey of a Woman in the Beat Generation*, winner of the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award. Kerouac's girlfriend at the time *On the Road* was published and a witness to the public clamor that resulted, Johnson closes *Minor Characters* with the image of herself at "twentytwo, with her hair hanging below her shoulders, all in black like Masha in *The Seagull* - black stockings, black skirt, black sweater." Johnson's happy, pleased to be seated "at the table in the exact center of the universe, that midnight place where so much is converging, the only place . . . that's alive." Johnson sees, however, that

as a female, she is not quite part of this convergence. A fact she ignores, sitting by in her excitement as the voices of the men, always the men, passionately rise and fall and their beer glasses collect and the smoke of their cigarettes rises toward the ceiling and the dead culture is surely being wakened. Merely being here, she tells herself, is enough.And at that time, it is.

Aware of the marginalization of women in Beat culture, literary historian Michael Davidson argues that

The Beats offered a new complex set of possible roles for males that, even if they subordinated women, at least offered an alternative to the consumerist ideology of sexuality projected by the *Playboy* magazine

stereotype of heterosexuality and to the *Saturday Evening Post* version of the nuclear family.

The Beats, then, offered men a way out of the organized system, and though they were guilty of replicating "square" culture's subordination of women, they offered women a way out, too. For many women, Beat culture was preferable to a life in the suburbs.

Even so, replication of this sort is especially disheartening when it occurs within a subculture that purports to be egalitarian and liberationist by nature. Consider, for instance, the goals of the bohemian occupants of Greenwich Village thirty to forty years earlier:

1. The idea of salvation by the child. . .
2. The idea of self-expression. . .
3. The idea of paganism. . .
4. The idea of living for the moment. . .
5. The idea of liberty. . .
6. The idea of female equality. . .
7. The idea of psychological adjustment. . .
8. The idea of changing place. . .

That the Beats adhered to all but one of these tenets bespeaks their bohemian roots and aspirations; that their "idea of liberty" did not extend equally to women points to their investment in square, or patriarchal, conventions. Looking back at Beat culture in a June 1989 *Village Voice* article, feminist writer and activist Alix Kates Shulman decries the conspicuous absence of the Emma Goldmans and Isadora Duncans of an earlier generation of bohemians: "[B]y the time the Beats were ascendant, the postwar renewal of mandatory domesticity, sexual repression, and gender rigidity had so routed feminism that it lapsed even in bohemia."

During the height of public interest in Beats and beatniks, the place of women in Beat culture was publicized by detractors and exponents alike. In 1959, *Life* attacked Beat males on a number of grounds, one of which was their financial dependence on women. The year before, *Playboy* had also attacked the Beats. If Beat women did all the work at home and in the marketplace to support their men, they also, according to *Playboy*, did all the work in bed: "When the hipster makes it with a girl, he avoids admitting that he likes her. He keeps cool. He asks her to do the work, and his ambition is to think about nothing, zero, strictly from nadaville, while she plays bouncy-bouncy on him." In both versions, the Beat male offends. In the *Life* version, the problem is work; in the *Playboy*, sex. In neither case, the square nor the hip, is the Beat rebel masculine enough.

Even sympathetic accounts like Lawrence Lipton's (1959) *The Holy Barbarians* and Paul Goodman's (1960) *Growing Up Absurd* wondered aloud why women would be interested in a lifestyle that seemed so obviously to subordinate them. Lipton asked, "What are they like, these women of the beat generation pads? Where do they come from, how do they get here? And why?" Goodman suggested that the Beats might be even more exclusionist than their "square" counterparts: "What is in it for the women

who accompany the Beats? The characteristic Beat culture, unlike the American standard of living, is essentially for men, indeed for very young men who are 'searching.'"

The typical woman in a Beat narrative, whether a memoir or a novel, lives in the margin of a margin. Consider, for instance, the following description by Joyce Johnson, a woman who, like her famous boyfriend, wanted to be a writer. She knew that margin all too well:

> The whole Beat scene had very little to do with the participation of women as artists themselves. The real communication was going on between the men, and the women were there as onlookers. Their old ladies. You kept your mouth shut, and if you were intelligent and interested in things you might pick up what you could. It was a very masculine aesthetic.

As Beat artists, the men were marginalized figures, their shoulders "queer," their status "other." As "onlookers" of the overlooked, their "old ladies" were doubly marginalized. Neither ladies nor artists in their own right, they were at that point too wild for some, not wild enough for others. The rewiring of America had begun, though, and the Beat convergence of body and word around a "table in the exact center of the universe" was instrumental in bringing "the dead culture" back to life. If the Joyce Johnsons of Beat culture suffered because they were women, they chose to do so because suburbia offered the same job without the benefits.

Like the American social experiment that can boast of many successes, so can the Beat experiment. Burroughs may be right when he claims, "There's no doubt that we're living in a freer America as a result of the Beat literary movement." Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac certainly redefined both the wheel and the shoulder that would make it turn. But the embodied manuscripts they imagined waving seditiously from rooftops were certainly genitally male, the pen as phallus as pen, that old inky sword ripping a highly masculine signature across the body and mind of America. At their worst as a cultural agent, they suffered a failure of the imagination, reverting to old patterns. As Catharine R. Stimpson so ably puts it: "The Beats often feminized invective to scorn the fag. Such a practice is but one mark of a cultural boundary they could rarely cross: a traditional construction of the female, and of the feminine." The Beat movement was, in many ways, what Nina Baym, my dissertation director, did not want to have to deal with: "some big macho trip."

At their best, the Beats forced a national dialogue about alternative discourse and community, and, in their unofficial credo that "open form" means "open mind," they helped America realize what it already knew: that there's room at the wheel for everyone's word and hairy naked accomplishment- body, everyone's story and shoulder, regardless of whether everyone's genitals can wave like manuscripts from rooftops. Did the Beats realize that at the time? Apparently not, but the failure of feminism in Beat culture is the failure of feminism in 1950s' America. Twentieth-century bohemian

enclaves, regardless of the decade, have always depended on what Davidson calls "elaborate pecking orders and cult loyalties", and gender has always, regardless of the enclave, produced margins into which women have had to write themselves.

In the twentieth-century narrative of bohemian involvement in women's rights, the Beats are not well positioned historically. Without the advantage of the feminist networks and forums that had some say in European and American bohemian communities prior to World War II, the Beat project has come to constitute, for many, a movement of men for men. Though it sought to rewire America through confrontational, confessional art and liberationist politics, its shortsightedness left key bits of the job undone.

Given historical reminders like this one, can today's men's movement avoid what my piano-moving buddy Ken Stratton suspects is a reactionary impulse and remember that no account, whether literary or critical, is ever disinterested is ever free of autobiography, is ever anything but the story of someone's Other as it is simultaneously the story of everyone's shoulder positioning itself at the wheel? The men's movement, like the women's movement out of which and against which it has grown, is a set of competing - and, in some cases, hostile - practices (e.g., pro-feminist, mythopoetic, men's rights). Thus, it is not so much a movement as it is a narrative of competing stories, of hairy naked accomplishment-bodies born in autobiography and lived in consciousness and reinvention. The degree to which the men's movement moves at all depends upon the wheel and how many competing "queer shoulders," how much diversity, it permits and how much we have learned, or unlearned, from past movements.

Source: Stephen Davenport, "Queer Shoulders to the Wheel: Beat Movement as Men's Movement," in *The Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, May 1995, pp. 297-307.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Prothero examines spirituality and religion within the Beat movement.

For the beat generation of the 1940s and 1950s, dissertation time is here. Magazine and newspaper critics have gotten in their jabs. Now scholars are starting to analyze the literature and legacy of the beat writers. In the last few years biographers have lined up to interpret the lives of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, and publishers have rushed into print a host of beat journals, letters, memoirs, and anthologies. The most recent *Dictionary of Literary Biography* devotes two large volumes to sixty-seven beat writers, including Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, John Clellon Holmes, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, Peter Orlovsky, Michael McClure, and Philip Whalen.

Historical writing on relatively recent subjects tends to get bogged down in issues raised by early critics, and recent scholarship on the beat generation is no exception to this rule. From the pages of *Life* and *Partisan Review*, contemporary scholars have inherited two key interpretive lines that I want to call into question here: first, the tendency to view the beat movement rather narrowly as a literary or cultural impulse; and second, the inclination to judge this impulse negatively, as a *revolt against* rather than a *protest for* something.

Although there was a smattering of early critical acclaim for the beat writers, neither their literature nor their movement fared well with the critics. One reviewer called William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* "a prolonged scream of hatred and disgust, an effort to keep the reader's nose down in the mud for 250 pages." Kerouac's *On the Road* was said to distinguish itself from true literature by its "poverty of emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic resources, an ineptitude of expression, and an inability to make anything dramatically meaningful". What bothered the critics most about the beats was their negativity. *Life* claimed they were at war with everything sacred in Eisenhower's America - "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." The *Nation* dismissed the beats as "nay-sayers"; even *Playboy* called them "nihilists."

This interpretation reached its rhetorical heights in a 1958 *Partisan Review* review of *On the Road* by Norman Podhoretz. While *Life* had compared the beats with communists and anarchists, Podhoretz grouped them with Nazis and Hell's Angels. "The Bohemianism of the 1950s is hostile to civilization; it worships primitivism, instinct, energy, 'blood,'" he wrote. "This is a revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul." In a follow-up note in the next issue, Podhoretz asked those who wrote in to defend the beat writers, "Where is the 'affirmation of life' in all this? Where is the spontaneity and vitality? It sounds more like an affirmation of death to me."

The beats responded to this critical chorus with one voice. "Beat," Kerouac asserted, stood not for "beat down" but for "beatific." "I want to speak *for* things," he explained. "For the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, for the divinest man who ever lived who was German (Bach) I speak out, for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out." To those who called "Howl," a "howl against civilization," Ginsberg replied that his signature poem was a protest in the original sense of "pro-attestation, that is testimony in favor of Value." He too described his protest in religious terms. "'Howl' is an 'Affirmation' by individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity," he explained. "The poems are religious and I meant them to be."

Apologies of this sort have convinced most scholars of American literature that the beat movement amounted to something rather than nothing. Beat literature is, as a result, edging its way into the American literary canon. But exactly what (and how much) beat poems and novels amount to remains a matter of debate. Few interpreters now ignore entirely the obvious spiritual concerns of the beats' work. But the tendency among literary scholars is to see those concerns as tangential rather than constitutive.

Surprisingly, historians of American religion have demonstrated even less interest in beat spirituality. The beats are conspicuously absent from standard surveys of the field and from recent monographs on American religion in the postwar period. Historians of American religion who have explored beat spirituality have tended to focus almost exclusively on the beats' engagement with Zen and then to dismiss that engagement as haphazard. Thus Carl T. Jackson, echoing Alan Watts's earlier contention that "beat Zen" is "phony zen," contends in a recent article that the beats (with one exception) deviated from some hypostatized "authentic" Zen and therefore fail to qualify as "real" Zen Buddhists. While such judgments may do something to safeguard Zen orthodoxy (whatever that may be), they tend, perhaps unintentionally, to render beat spirituality illegitimate even while informing us about it.

Forty years ago Perry Miller contended that transcendentalism, which had previously been interpreted largely in literary terms, was essentially a "religious demonstration" and as such deserved a prominent place not only in American literature but also in American religious history. This article presents an analogous, if somewhat more modest, argument for the beat movement. My thesis is that the beats were spiritual protesters as well as literary innovators and ought, therefore, to be viewed at least as minor characters in the drama of American religion. If, as Miller argues, transcendentalism represented a religious revolt against "corpse-cold" Unitarian orthodoxy, the beat movement represented a spiritual protest against what the beats perceived as the moribund orthodoxies of 1950s America.

Critical Essay #4

The beat movement began with the meeting of Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg in New York in 1944, coursed its way through the San Francisco poetry renaissance of the 1950s, and spent itself sometime in the early 1960s. It was led by three main figures□a working-class French-Canadian Catholic from Lowell, Massachusetts (Kerouac), a middle-class Russian-American Jew from Paterson, New Jersey (Ginsberg), and an upper-class Anglo-American Protestant from St. Louis (Burroughs)□ and included a large supporting cast of novelists, poets, and hangers-on. What united these men (and the vast majority of them were men) was a "new consciousness" or a "new vision."

Like any spiritual innovation, this new vision included a rejection of dominant spiritual norms and established religious institutions. Neither of the two most popular spiritual options of the early postwar period□the new evangelicalism of Billy Graham and the mind cure of Rabbi Joshua Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946), Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen's *Peace of Soul* (1949), and the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952)□seemed viable to the beats in the light of the long postwar shadow cast by the Holocaust, the bomb, and the cold war. Thus Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg joined neo-orthodox theologians H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr in rejecting any easy return to normalcy and in damning the evangelical and mind-cure revivals as vacuous at best. For this beat trio, neither positive thinking nor evangelical Christianity could make sense of God's apparent exodus from the world. But somehow Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, a book the beats studied and discussed in the late 1940s, could.

Inspired by Spengler's apocalypticism, the beats announced the death of the tribal god of American materialism and mechanization. ("There is a God / dying in America," Ginsberg proclaimed.) But in keeping with Spengler's cyclical view of history, they prophesied that a new deity was arising from the wreckage. (Ginsberg called it ". . . an inner / anterior image / of divinity / beckoning me out / to pilgrimage.")

In 1938, two years after his graduation from Harvard, William Burroughs wrote a humorous yet foreboding short story entitled "Twilight's Last Gleamings." Loosely based on the sinking of the Titanic, this cynical satire is a dark allegory on the fall of America and the refusal of Americans to accept the inevitability of their own deaths and the demise of their civilization. Burroughs's characters are Neros with urban savvy: con men conning, robbers robbing, preachers preaching as the ship goes down. The moral of this story is well expressed in a later poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti:

The end has just begun
I want to announce it
Run don't walk
to the nearest exit.

Along with this preoccupation with America's eschaton, the theme of individual suffering and death looms in beat writing. Unlike Liebman, Sheen, and Peale, who resolved to

will into existence a "placid decade," the beats devoted their lives and their literature to understanding and explicating the private hells of those who remained on the margins of postwar prosperity. Burroughs's first four books—*Junkie*, *Queer*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Yage Letters*—document in factualist style the horrors of addiction to "junk" in its many forms (drugs, sex, power). Much of Ginsberg's work, including "Howl" and "Kaddish," explores madness and death. Three of Kerouac's novels—*Maggie Cassady*, *The Subterraneans*, and *Tristessa*—are odes to lost loves; and his *Big Sur* depicts his own alcohol-induced breakdown.

If the beats had stopped here, critics' categorization of their work and thought as morbid or mad might have been accurate. But like the Lutheran preacher who hits her congregation with sin only to smother them with grace, the beats sought to move beyond predictions of social apocalypse and depictions of individual sadness to some transcendental hope. "The Beat Generation is insulted when linked to doom, thoughts of doom, fear of doom, anger of doom," Ginsberg, Corso, and Orlovsky protested in 1959. "It exhibits on every side, and in a bewildering number of facets," John Clellon Holmes added, "a perfect craving to believe. . . the stirrings of a quest." Thus the beats' *flight from* the churches and synagogues of the suburbs to city streets inhabited by whores and junkies, hobos and jazzmen never ceased to be a *search for* something to believe in, something to go by.

From the perspective of *Religionswissenschaft*, the beats shared much with pilgrims coursing their way to the world's sacred shrines. Like pilgrims to Lourdes or Mecca, the beats were liminal figures who expressed their cultural marginality by living spontaneously, dressing like bums, sharing their property, celebrating nakedness and sexuality, seeking mystical awareness through drugs and meditation, acting like "Zen lunatics" or holy fools, and perhaps above all stressing the chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness or *communitas* over the pragmatic functionality of social structure. The beats, in short, lived both on the road and on the edge. For them, as for pilgrims, transition was a semipermanent condition. What distinguished the beats from other pilgrims, however, was their lack of a "center out there." The beats shared, in short, not an identifiable geographical goal but an undefined commitment to a spiritual search. They aimed not to arrive but to travel and, in the process, to transform into sacred space every back alley through which they ambled and every tenement in which they lived. Thus the beats appear in their lives and in their novels not only as pilgrims but also as heroes (and authors) of quest tales, wandering (and writing) *bhikkhus* who scour the earth in a never fully satisfied attempt to find a place to rest. This commitment to the spiritual quest is expressed by Burroughs in *Naked Lunch:*

> Since early youth I had been searching for some secret, some key with which I could gain access to basic knowledge, answer some of the fundamental questions. Just what I was looking for, what I meant by basic knowledge or fundamental questions, I found difficult to define. I would follow a trail of clues.

On the trail that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs followed after the war, one important clue was provided by Spengler: the suggestion that the solution to their individual crises of faith (and to America's crisis of spirit) might lie outside western culture and civilization, in the Orient and in the "fellaheen" or uprooted of the world.

Critical Essay #5

Inspired by a populism akin to contemporary Latin American theologians' preferential option for the poor, the beats looked for spiritual insight not to religious elites but to the racially marginal and the socially inferior, "fellah" groups that shared with them an aversion to social structures and established religion. Hipsters and hobos, criminals and junkies, jazzmen and African-Americans initiated the beats into their alternative worlds, and the beats reciprocated by transforming them into the heroes of their novels and poems.

Shortly after Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs teamed up in New York in 1944, their circle of acquaintances expanded to include "teaheads from everywhere, hustlers with pimples, queens with pompadours. . . the unprotected, the unloved, the unkempt, the inept and sick" who hung out at the penny arcades, peep shows, and jazz clubs in the Bowery, Harlem, and Times Square. Kerouac described them in his first novel, *The Town and the City*, like this:

soldiers, sailors, the panhandlers and drifters, the
zoot-suiters, the hoodlums, the young men who
washed dishes in cafeterias from coast to coast, the
hitch-hikers, the hustlers, the drunks, the battered
lonely young Negroes, the twinkling little Chinese,
the dark Puerto Ricans, and the varieties of dungareed
young Americans in leather jackets who were
seamen and mechanics and garagemen everywhere.. .
All the cats and characters, all the spicks and spades,
Harlem-drowned, street-drunk and slain, crowded together,
streaming back and forth, looking for something,
waiting for something, forever moving around.

Recalling Dostoevsky's "underground men," Ginsberg dubbed these characters "subterraneans." Kerouac, assigning them a place a little closer to heaven, christened them "desolation angels."

Of all these fallen angels, the beats were especially enamored of Herbert Huncke, who according to Ginsberg "was to be found in 1945 passing on subways from Harlem to Broadway scoring for drugs, music, incense, lovers, Benzedrine Inhalers, second story furniture, coffee, all night vigils in 42nd Street Horn & Hardart and Bickford Cafeterias, encountering curious & beautiful solitaries of New York dawn." Huncke embodied for the beats both marginality and spirituality.

In his anonymity & holy Creephood in New York he
was the sensitive vehicle for a veritable new consciousness
which spread through him to others sensitized
by their dislocations from History and thence
to entire generations of a nation renewing itself for

fear of Apocalyptic Judgement. So in the grand
Karma of robotic Civilizations it may be that the
humblest, most afflicted, most persecuted, most suffering
lowly junkie hustling some change in the allnight
movie is the initiate of a Glory transcending his
Nation's consciousness that will swiftly draw that
Nation to its knees in tearful self-forgiveness.

Initiated by Huncke into this "holy Creephood," Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs now identified with the beat-up and the beat-down. Kerouac dropped out of Columbia, and the same university expelled Ginsberg. Burroughs began what would turn into a life of participant-observation of the netherworlds of gangsters, addicts, and hustlers. Kerouac explored the jazz clubs and marijuana bars of Harlem. Ginsberg investigated the lives of the working class in Paterson, New Jersey. All three men attempted to transform their experiences into literature worthy of Rimbaud or Baudelaire. By venerating Huncke (who according to beat lore was the first to use the term "beat") as a saint, the beats risked transforming their "new vision" into an amoral, nihilistic apocalypticism. What prevented this outcome, at least for Ginsberg and Kerouac, was the arrival in New York in 1947 of Neal Cassady.

The "secret hero" of Ginsberg's "Howl" and the inspiration for the ecstatic Dean Moriarty of Kerouac's *On the Road*, Cassady was born, quite literally, on the road (in a rumble seat in Salt Lake City while his mother and father were making their way to Hollywood). His parents separated when he was six years old, so he was raised by an alcoholic father in western pool halls, freight yards, and flophouses. While a teenager, Cassady supposedly stole over five hundred cars and seduced nearly as many women. He did six stints in reformatories before landing in San Quentin in the late 1950s.

Kerouac and Ginsberg celebrated and romanticized Cassady as a "holy goof." Kerouac, who by 1947 had grown tired of the apocalyptic intellectualism of Burroughs, greeted the lusty Cassady as a "long-lost brother." Contrasting Cassady to Huncke, Kerouac observed that "his 'criminality' was not something that sulked and sneered; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides)." Ginsberg also embraced Cassady, who soon became his lover, in mythic terms - as "cocksman and Adonis of Denver." Burroughs, however, dissented, dismissing Cassady as a con man. Thus Cassady's arrival precipitated a split of sorts in the nascent beat movement. The pro-Huncke Burroughs persisted in a more absurdist and apocalyptic reading of the "new vision" (beat as beat down) while Ginsberg and Kerouac attempted to incorporate in their new, pro-Cassady consciousness some redemptive force or transcendental hope (beat as beatitude).

Cassady redeemed the beatific beats' "new vision" by pointing the way to what would become two major affirmations of Kerouac's and Ginsberg's spirituality: the sacralization of everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships. If Dean Moriarty preaches a gospel in *On the Road*, it is that every moment is sacred, especially when shared with friends. And if he incarnates an ethic, it is that since all human beings are of

one piece, every person must share in every other person's sorrow just as surely as all people will be delivered to heaven together in the end. Thus Cassady personified for Kerouac and Ginsberg the sacred connections of *communitas*. While Huncke symbolized the misery of lonely individuals suffering and dying in dark Times Square bars, Cassady symbolized the splendor of cosmic companions digging the open road.

Shortly after their initial encounter in 1947, Ginsberg and Cassady bowed down together at the edge of an Oklahoma highway and vowed always to care for one another. Seven years later Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky agreed to "explore each other until we reached the mystical 'X' together" and promised "that neither of us would go into heaven unless we could get the other one in." Such covenants expressed ritualistically Ginsberg's credo "that we are all one Self with one being, one consciousness." They represented an attempt to routinize the group's *communitas*, to incarnate Whitman's vision of "fervent comradeship" in a spiritual brotherhood of beatific monks.

Cassady inspired in this way a shift in the beatific beats' writing from the pessimistic, Dreiserian realism that would mark Burroughs's work to a more optimistic, even transcendental realism: literature as "a clear statement of fact about misery. . . *and* splendor [my emphasis]." Like Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac would continue to depict the suffering of the fellaheen, but unlike him they would insist that such suffering was both revelatory and redemptive. Thus Ginsberg transformed the profanity of working-class life in Paterson into a hierophany:

The alleys, the dye works,
Mill Street in the smoke,
melancholy of the bars,
the sadness of long highways,
negroes climbing around
the rusted iron by the river,
the bathing pool hidden
behind the silk factory
fed by its drainage pipes;
all the pictures we carry in our mind

images of the thirties
depression and class consciousness
transformed above politics
filled with fire
with the appearance of God.

And thus Kerouac insisted that while authors must "accept loss forever," they should nonetheless "believe in the holy contour of life."

Critical Essay #6

If the beats followed Spengler's clue in looking to fellaheen like Huncke and Cassady for spiritual insight, they also followed his lead in steering their spiritual quest toward Asia. While other Americans were forging Protestant-Catholic-Jewish alliances during Eisenhower's presidency, the beats were moving toward a far more radical ecumenism. In addition to the Catholicism of Kerouac, the Protestantism of Burroughs, and the Judaism of Ginsberg, the beats studied gnosticism, mysticism, native American lore, Aztec and Mayan mythology, American transcendentalism, Hinduism, and especially Buddhism.

This religious eclecticism was epitomized by Jack Kerouac who, though born a Catholic, practiced Buddhist meditation and once observed the Muslim fast of Ramadan. When asked in an interview to whom he prayed, Kerouac replied, "I pray to my little brother, who died, and to my father, and to Buddha, and to Jesus Christ, and to the Virgin Mary." His pluralism reached still farther in this creedal chorus from *Mexico City Blues:*

I believe in the sweetness
of Jesus
And Buddha□
I believe
In St. Francis
Avaloki
Tesvara,
the Saints
Of First Century
India A D
And Scholars
Santivedan
And Otherwise
Santayanan
Everywhere

Only Ginsberg, a self-styled "Buddhist Jew," approached Kerouac's eclecticism. In a poem entitled "Wichita Vortex Sutra" he invoked a litany of gods:

million-faced Tathagata gone past suffering
Preserver Harekrishna returning in the age of pain
Sacred Heart my Christ acceptable
Allah the Compassionate One
Jaweh Righteous One
all Knowledge-Princes of Earth-man, all
ancient Seraphim of heavenly Desire, Devas, yogis
& holyman I chant to□

Clearly the beats were not wed exclusively to any one religious tradition. One religion, however, did inspire more of them more deeply than any other, namely, Buddhism, especially the Zen and Yogacara formulations of the Mahayana school. Though Burroughs had introduced them through Spengler to Asian thought in 1945, Kerouac and Ginsberg did not begin to study Buddhism in earnest until 1953. In that year a reading of Thoreau's *Walden* inspired Kerouac to learn more about Asian religious traditions. He began his investigation by reading Ashvagosa's biography of Gautama Buddha. Struck by the Buddha's injunction to "Repose Beyond Fate," Kerouac sat down to meditate. He then experienced what he later described as "golden swarms of nothing." Immediately he left to go to San Jose to enlighten Neal Cassady. But Cassady had already found his own prophet in the person of Edgar Cayce, whose strange brew of Christian metaphysics, clairvoyance, reincarnation, and karma had whetted his eclectic appetite. While in San Jose, Kerouac began to study Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, especially the Diamond Sutra, the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, and the Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, as they appeared in Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible.*

Buddhism attracted Kerouac because it seemed to make sense of the central facts of his experience (suffering, impermanence) and to affirm his intuition that life was dreamlike and illusory. Perhaps more importantly, by locating the origin of suffering in desire, the Buddhist sutras seemed to offer a way out. In the summer of 1954 Kerouac wrote to Burroughs, who was now living in Tangier, about his discovery of Buddhism and his vow to remain celibate for a year in an attempt to mitigate his desire and thus his suffering. Burroughs wrote back, urging Kerouac not to use Buddhism as "psychic junk." "A man who uses Buddhism or any other instrument to remove love from his being in order to avoid suffering has committed, in my mind, a sacrilege comparable to castration," he wrote. "Suffering is a chance you have to take by the fact of being alive." Interestingly, Burroughs wrote a letter that same summer to Ginsberg, urging him to "dig" Tibetan Buddhism if he had not yet done so. Burroughs was opposed not to Buddhism itself but to its use in the West as some sort of "final fix."

Ginsberg took Burroughs's advice, and by mid-decade the novels and poems of Kerouac and Ginsberg were filled with references to Buddhism. In one eighteen-month period between 1954 and 1956 Kerouac meditated daily and still found the time to write five books with a decidedly Buddhist bent. Three of these works, *Some of the Dharma* (a thousand-page personal meditation), *Buddha Tells Us* (an American version of the Surangama Sutra), and *Wake Up* (a life of the Buddha) have never been published. A book of Buddhist poems, *Mexico City Blues*, and a beat sutra entitled *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* appeared in 1959 and 1960 respectively.

In 1955 Ginsberg and Kerouac met Gary Snyder, a mountain poet and Zen initiate, who contributed greatly to their understanding of Buddhism and their commitment to it. Just as Neal Cassady appeared as Dean Moriarty, the hero of *On the Road*, Snyder was immortalized as Japhy Ryder, the thinly veiled protagonist of *Dharma Bums*. Although Kerouac was clearly intrigued by Snyder and by Zen, he devoted a good portion of *Dharma Bums* to arguments between Ray Smith (himself) and Ryder (Snyder) and to criticisms of Zen. Smith, who presents himself not as a Zen Buddhist but as "an old fashioned dreamy hinayana coward of later mahayanism," clashed with Ryder and his

Zen on a number of occasions. One of Smith's arguments was that showing compassion (*karuna*) was more important than achieving insight (*prajna*). Smith was especially critical of the violence that sometimes attended uncracked Zen koans. "It's mean," he complained to Ryder, "All those Zen masters throwing young kids in the mud because they can't answer their silly word question." "Compassion," Smith contended, "is the heart of Buddhism." Unlike Ryder who had no use for Christianity. Smith revered not only Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, but also Jesus Christ. "After all," he explained, "a lot of people say he is Maitreya [which] means 'Love' in Sanskrit and that's all Christ talked about was love."

Despite such disputes, Kerouac, Snyder, and Ginsberg agreed on a few crucial points that they shared with Buddhism (especially the Mahayana tradition's Yogacara school). They believed, for example, that life is characterized by suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*). Yet they also believed that this world, at least as it appears to our senses, is ephemeral and illusory. "Happiness consists in realizing that it is all a great strange dream," Kerouac wrote in *Lonesome Traveler.* And he echoed the sentiment (albeit in decidedly biblical grammar) in *Dharma Bums:* "Believe that the world is an ethereal flower, and ye live."

This shared awareness of what Ginsberg called "the phantom nature of being" was tremendously liberating for the beatific beats. It enabled them both to confront suffering and death as major obstacles in this relative world of appearances and to see their ultimate insignificance from the absolute perspective of heaven or nirvana. It empowered them, moreover, to deny the absolute reality of the material world even as they affirmed enthusiastically our spiritual experiences in it. Out of such paradoxes came the this-worldly joy of statements like "This is it!," "We're already there and always were." "We're all in Heaven now," "The world has a beautiful soul," "The world is drenched in spirit," "everything's all right."

There is a constant tension in beat literature, therefore, between misery and splendor, between an overwhelming sadness and an overcoming joy. "The world is beautiful place / to be born into," Lawrence Ferlinghetti observed, "if you don't mind happiness / not always being / so very much fun / if you don't mind a touch of hell now and then." In the beat cosmos God is both absent and everywhere. Dualisms between sacred and profane, body and soul, matter and spirit, nirvana and samsara do not hold. Thus Ginsberg's celebrated encounter with the poet William Blake in Harlem in 1948 incorporated both a vision of death ("like hearing the doom of the whole universe") and a vision of heaven ("a breakthrough from ordinary habitual quotidian consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing all of heaven in a flower"). And so one of Ginsberg's most profane poems, "Howl," contains his boldest affirmation of the sacred camouflaged in the profane:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy!
The world is holy! The soul is Holy! The skin is
holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and

hand and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!

Critical Essay #7

After the beat generation graduated from young adulthood to middle age in the 1960s, beat writers went in different directions. Following an extended stint at the wheel of the bus of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, Cassady collapsed along a railroad track and died of exposure in Mexico in 1968. Kerouac's seemingly endless cycles of exile and return to his mother's home in Lowell ended in 1969 when he died an alcoholic's death of cirrhosis of the liver. Burroughs, perhaps the least likely of beats to make it past middle age, is alive and well and enjoying the acclaim of European critics. Ginsberg too has survived even his transmigration from literary rebel to de facto poet laureate of the United States. In this way beat writers have earned a place in the history of American letters.

What I have argued here is that the beats also deserve a place in American religious history. More than literary innovators or bohemian rebels, the beats were wandering monks and mystical seers. They went on the road - from New York to San Francisco to Mexico City to Tangier - because they could not find God in the churches and synagogues of postwar America. They venerated the poor, the racially marginal and the socially inferior because they saw no spiritual vitality in the celebrated postwar religious revival of mainstream white preachers. And they experimented with drugs, psychoanalysis, bisexuality, jazz, mantra chanting, Zen meditation, and new literary forms in an attempt to conjure the gods within.

Like the transcendentalists who inspired them, the beats were critics of "corpse-cold" orthodoxies; they were champions of spiritual experience over theological formulations who responded to the challenge of religious pluralism by conjuring out of inherited and imported materials a wholly new religious vision. Like Emerson, the beats aimed to make contact with the sacred on the nonverbal, trans-conceptual level of intuition and feeling, and then to transmit at least a part of what they had experienced into words. Like Thoreau, they insisted on the sanctity of everyday life and the sainthood of the nonconformist. And like George Ripley and his associates at Brook Farm, they aimed to create a spiritual brotherhood based on shared experiences, shared property, shared literature, and an ethic of "continual conscious compassion." With transcendentalists of all stripes, the beats gloried in blurring distinctions between matter and spirit, divinity and humanity, the sacred and the profane.

The beats diverged from their transcendentalist forebears (and toward their neo-orthodox contemporaries), however, in maintaining a more sanguine view of the problems of human existence and the possibility of social progress. In the beat cosmos, society is running toward apocalypse; individuals are doomed to suffer and die, and perhaps to endure addiction or madness along the way. But in the beatitudes according to Kerouac and Ginsberg, those who suffer are blessed, and the sacrament of friendship can redeem a portion of that suffering. In the last analysis, "The bum's as holy as the seraphim!" and everyone - junkies and criminals, beats and squares, Catholics and Buddhists, culture-peoples and fellaheen - is raised up from the dreamworld of our quotidian existences and "buried in heaven together."

On the question of whether this is a compelling spiritual vision, reasonable people can and will disagree. All I argue here is that the vision is in fact spiritual and, as such, warrants the scrutiny of scholars of American religion. Precisely how such scrutiny might alter our understanding of American religion and culture I cannot say. But I suspect greater attention to beat spirituality will open up at least one avenue of revision.

Traditional accounts of American religion and culture in the 1950s have tended toward consensus rather than dissension. Social critics and historians have described early postwar America as a "one-dimensional" society in which "organization men" produced a mass culture consumed by "lonely crowds." Religious historians too have depicted the decade as placid rather than contentious - an age in which a general anxiety was rather effectively relieved by a generic faith in a Judeo-Christian God and the American Way of Life. From this perspective the 1960s appear as something of a historiographic non sequitur. Thus, according to religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom, the sixties represent "a radical turn" in America's religious road, a crossroads between a more consensual Protestant (or Judeo-Christian) America and a more conflictual "Post-Protestant America."

While this article does not directly engage this prevailing thesis, it does support recent scholarly work underscoring continuities rather than discontinuities between the 1950s and 1960s. While the ostensibly radical religious pluralism of the sixties may not seem inevitable to students of beat spirituality, it comes as far less of a surprise. A decade before the death-of-God movement in theology and the eastward turn in religion the beats were announcing the death of the gods of materialism and mechanization and looking to Buddhism for spiritual insight. And nearly two decades before the rise of black and Latin American liberation theologies the beats incorporated the socially down and the racially out in their radically inclusive litany of the saints. To study the beats alongside Graham, Peale, Liebman, and Sheen is to glimpse the existence of counter-currents of spiritual resistance coursing around (if not through) the placid religious mainstream.

Source: Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," in *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2, April 1991, pp. 205-22.

Adaptations

The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg, directed by Jerry Aronson and released in 1994, is a comprehensive, affectionate documentary on the poet's life. It runs eighty-three minutes and includes accounts of Ginsberg's troubled childhood, his fame as a Beat and, later, as a hippie, and as a compassionate, still active, older poet.

John Antonelli's documentary *Kerouac* was released in 1995. The film begins and ends with Kerouac reading excerpts from *On the Road* and uses an actor to portray some of the scenes from the Beat writer's life. Actual footage of Kerouac includes TV clips, one showing his appearance on the *William F. Buckley Show*, in which he insults Ferlinghetti and declares himself a Catholic.

In 1997, writer and director Stephen Kay released *The Last Time I Committed Suicide*, a visual adaptation of actual letters written by Cassady and sent to Kerouac. The movie chronicles Cassady's life as an oversexed young man in Denver and features rich, excellent detail of postwar American culture.

The four-CD set *Howls, Raps and Roars: Recordings from the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance*, produced by Fantasy Records, was released in 1993. It includes fifty-four minutes of Allen Ginsberg reading "Howl," "Footnote to Howl," and "Supermarket in California," among other poems, as well as readings by Kenneth Rexroth, Ferlinghetti, Corso, and others.

Topics for Further Study

In the 1950s, the Beat Movement touted frequent drug use, sexual freedom, disinterest in social and political issues, and disregard for law. How do you think a movement like this would fare at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Why would American society tolerate a new Beat Movement or why would it not?

Though few in number, all the original members of the Beat Generation were young, white males, yet women and African Americans were certainly affected by and involved in the movement. Do some research to find out more about the lesser-known Beats and write an essay on how their lives were similar to or different from the prominent ones.

Of the three main artistic facets of the Beat Movement□writing, visual art, and music□ the writings were the most controversial and often least welcomed by mainstream Americans. Why do you think this was true? What was it about Beat literature that was so different from Abstract Expressionist art and bebop music?

Author Gertrude Stein coined the term "Lost Generation" in the 1920s as a label for the intellectuals, poets, artists, and writers who fled to France after World War I. What did Stein mean by this term and how was the Lost Generation different from or similar to the Beat Generation?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: The beginnings of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union create an uneasy current of fear and doubt in an otherwise hopeful and complacent post-World War II United States. The conflict involves massive arms buildup by both nations, including nuclear warheads□the most worrisome aspect of the Cold War.
Today: The United States and Russia are allies in the war on terrorism, although President George W. Bush's decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which forbids testing and deployment of a ballistic missile defense system, greatly concerns Russian officials.

1940s: In an effort to flee the crime and "unsavory" elements of the big city, many Americans head to the suburbs. In Long Island, New York, builders erect Levittown, a middle-class suburb with prefabricated housing materials, the first of its kind. Over the next decade, land values increase, sometimes up to 3000 percent, in prime suburban neighborhoods, where population increases by 44 percent.

Today: Many inner-city areas are little more than dilapidated slums with high crime rates and widespread drug trafficking. Sociologists largely blame the "white flight" of the 1940s and 1950s for the decline of the cities, although there are current efforts to restore many downtowns and historical areas of cities and to draw people of all races and economic levels back there to live.

1950s: The beginning of what many will call the commercialization of the United States comes in the form of fast food and theme parks. Ray Kroc buys out a hamburger franchise from the McDonald brothers and the golden arches are born. Harland Sanders begins his Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise. In California, Disneyland opens, the first theme park in the U.S. "history of leisure," and the Barbie doll is introduced to delighted children and adult collectors alike.

Today: Fast food chains are the mainstay of many Americans' diets, although the once omnipotent McDonald's has tough competition from other burger restaurants as well as from pizza, taco, and deli sandwich servers. The Disney empire has expanded to include Disney World in Florida and similar theme parks throughout the world. Although the parks in the United States still flourish, EuroDisney has suffered some losses over recent years.

1950s: Homosexual relationships are common among the Beat Generation but condemned by mainstream Americans as well as by the legal system. Labeled as sexual psychopaths under many states' laws, gays and lesbians are classed together with child molesters and rapists. In one instance in 1954, police in Sioux City, Iowa, arrest twenty suspected homosexual men after two children are brutally murdered. Although authorities never claim the men have anything to do with the crime, they are sentenced to a mental institution until "cured."

Today: Legal recognition of same-sex unions and spousal benefits for long-term domestic partners are important gay-rights issues. While there is some relaxation of social attitudes towards gays and lesbians in current times, the legal system still presents a struggle for gays and lesbians. By the end of the twentieth century, thirty states have explicitly banned same-sex marriages, and, at the national level, the Defense of Marriage Act (1996) restricts the federal definition of marriage to heterosexual couples.

What Do I Read Next?

In 2000, literary historian Thomas Newhouse published *The Beat Generation and the Popular Novel in the United States, 1945-1970*. Newhouse provides history and criticism on popular American novels in chapters covering "The War at Home: The Novel of Juvenile Delinquency," "Hipsters, Beats, and Supermen," "Breaking the Last Taboo: The Gay Novel," and "Which Way Is Up? The Drug Novel."

Thomas Owens provides a thorough look at the innovative and controversial style of jazz that came alive in the 1940s and 1950s in *Bebop: The Music and Its Players* (1995). Focusing on the roots of bebop and moving into a study of its major players, including Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, Owens presents a readable, yet studious, account of the music and the techniques of the musicians. Serious jazz lovers will enjoy this work.

In Michael Leja's 1993 book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, the author suggests that Abstract Expressionist artists were part of a culture-wide initiative to "re-imagine the self." Incorporating the works and interests of other personalities of the period, Leja compares such artists as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning to contemporary essayists, Hollywood filmmakers, journalists, and popular philosophers.

In 1997, Yale professor John Lewis Gaddis published *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. An expert on this period in history, Gaddis argues that there was indeed an international Communist conspiracy, that Castro and Khrushchev were victorious over Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis, and that, ultimately, the Cold War was inevitable. This is a thought-provoking look at a volatile time in U.S. history.

Further Study

Charters, Ann, *Kerouac*, Straight Arrow Books, 1973.

This book is regarded as one of the most honest portrayals of both Kerouac and the Beats in general. Here, Charters thoroughly chronicles the life of the man that some consider "king" of the Beats. In the final section of the book, her description of a visit she made to Kerouac's home in 1966 and the condition in which she found Kerouac himself implies anything but royalty.

Knight, Brenda, *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*, Conari Press, 1996.

This book profiles forty members of the Beat Generation who are often overlooked□the women of the movement. Although their exploits and accomplishments are not as well publicized as those of their male counterparts, female Beats wrote poetry, took drugs, went on the road, listened to jazz, and lived on the fringe just as the men did. This insightful book includes fascinating biographies, more than fifty rare photos, and excerpts of the original writings of Beat women.

Miles, Barry, *Ginsberg: A Biography*, Simon and Schuster, 1989.

Miles, a friend of Ginsberg, does an excellent job of portraying his subject as both the legendary Beat poet and as an average man in everyday life. This book provides a solid biography of Ginsberg and explores the effect of the Beat Movement on American culture and mind-set and how it anticipated the more radical times of the 1960s.

Morgan, Ted, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*, Henry Holt, 1988.

In this biography of Burroughs, Morgan expertly depicts a subject whom many may consider difficult to write about. The biographer's success derives from the thoroughness of his research that provides details on such subtopics, as a history of Los Alamos, Texas, where Burroughs attended school. *Literary Outlaw*

provides a fair and provocative look at a Beat icon whose decadent life makes for fascinating reading.

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Foster, Edward Halsey, *Understanding the Beats*, University of South Carolina Press, 1992, p. 197.

Ginsberg, Allen, "Howl," in *Howl and Other Poems*, City Lights, 1956.

Watson, Steven, *Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960*, Pantheon Books, 1995.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literary Movements for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literary Movements for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LMfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LMfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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