

# On the Road to Transcendence: The Beat Generation in Historical and Cultural Context

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
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**Na putu prema transcendentnosti: Beat generacija u povijesnom  
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**On the Road to Transcendence: The Beat Generation in Historical  
and Cultural Context**

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2023

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

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## **Abstract**

The Beat Generation is known as one of the most polarizing, yet influential literary and cultural movements in American history. Writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs saw the world in a different light than what the media and mainstream society presented it. They embraced topics which were considered obscene or taboo at the time and demystified them in their works, giving the readers a glimpse of a different way of life. They were constantly criticized and were seen as outsiders, which is not surprising considering their avant-garde lifestyle of travelling and the constant search for “the kicks.” They were an underground group of writers and artists that all shared the same ideas and visions, as well as a detest for the materialistic society and the censorship present in the media. After their most known releases, Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 1957, Ginsberg’s *Howl* in 1956, and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* in 1959, the Beats gained a wider audience. They became pop culture icons, which the media recognized and used for their own financial profit. Their influence was also visible in music and cinematography, further cementing their legacy. Decades later, the Beats became what they fought against – a part of the mainstream culture and materialism appearing on the covers of fashion magazines and advertisement for multi-million-dollar companies. While the people behind the movement changed, their foundational ideas still exist and continue to inspire young people worldwide. This paper aims to portray the Beat Generation in the context of the post-war America, explain the importance of the movement on a number of examples, as well as examine the influence of Beat literature on popular culture and its lasting legacy.

**Keywords:** The Beat Generation, American Society, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs



## Introduction

While World War II brought many nations to their knees, the United States of America experienced a more positive outcome. The post-war age saw the financial and industrial boom which manifested in the majority of Americans living prosperous lives, enjoying the freedom, and seeking pleasure. This seemingly perfect way of life became the new norm, but younger generation saw it as monotonous, conservative, and conforming. Writers and artists who were disgusted by the mainstream way of life the media was trying to impose on people were known as the Beat Generation. Their way of creating was marked with drama and the unyielding will to create something new and out of the norm, something that was not connected to the old art, therefore the old ways of life. This bohemian group of people gained a cult status in the alternative communities, attracting people from the edge of society, and leading the hedonistic way of life, filled with drugs, sex, and adventure. Over the years, society acknowledged the Beat Generation as an important part of the American literature, which inevitably led to them being used in the media, both as an inspiration for other artists, but also in the commercial sphere.

The first section of the paper provides an overview of historical context, describing the state of the United States of America in the 1950s and the values that were accepted by the society. It deals with the post-war representation of the country in the media and the imposed ideas and values on the people by the government, which the Beats heavily disagreed with.

The second part details the poetics of the Beat Generation and the general features of the movement. It describes the Beat writers in the historical context, presents their main ideas and the reasons behind them, and it deals with the society's disapproval of their way of life. It also explains the importance of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York in the development and establishment of the movement, as well as it draws similarities between the Beat literature and jazz music, highlighting the influence the two had on each other.

The third part analyzes the influence the Beats and their literature had on the American society of the time on the examples of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. It describes the lasting impact the movement had on the youth culture that can be seen decades later.

The fourth part presents the Beat Generation in the popular culture, describing how they went from being portrayed in the media as the enemies of the society to misunderstood rebels. It deals with the question of what is considered to be “beat,” since the founders of the movement are no longer living the ideas that they once preached.

Finally, the paper concludes with final ideas regarding the topic, presenting the undeniable influence the Beat Generation had on the culture, as well as the literature in general.

## 1. The United States of America in the 1950s

With the end of the Second World War, the United States was experiencing a social and economic renaissance. People who came back from the battlefield wanted to continue their lives and rejoin the rapidly evolving American society. The government was ready to provide education and decently paid jobs for millions of veterans, making it possible to live a comfortable life. Naturally, people strived to achieve that level of comfort and enjoy the safe monotony of their lives after the war. During the 1950s, America was predominantly a conservative country, nurturing the well-known traditions and family values, as well as being extremely patriotic. The exceptional loyalty to their country was especially present when the fear of communism spread among the people. The absolute hatred toward the communist ideology, or the so-called “Red Scare,” was exacerbated by the government and the media during the McCarthy era, which set the ground for the Cold War. The societal shift did not only affect the adults, but the children as well. Young people were taught patriotism and loyalty from the earliest stages of their lives and their parents decided their life paths for them so they can enjoy the same life of comfort as them. They were “expected to go to school, get jobs, live moral lives, marry and have children, then take the torch of a prepackaged life from their parents and pass it onto their progeny” (Huddleston 1).

However, not everything was as beautiful as the media portrayed it to be. With the end of the World War II and the return of the soldiers who went to the battlefield, a major housing crisis ensued. A large amount of people came back homeless and the number of houses was not sufficient for them all because “no new houses had been built in 20 years or so” (Selcik 2). That resulted in people moving to suburbia and women going back to their traditional roles they had before World War II. Apart from gender issues, Americans faced homophobia, racism, and the overall fear of uncertainty. Everything had to be in order, not deviating from the norm or showing individual traits, and young people should not question the authority of any kind. Their elders, who were alive during the early twentieth century and witnessed the change in culture, gender rights, and art, wanted to deprive their children from that same feeling of being a part of some movement or community. They became the people who they rebelled against without realizing it, but numerous bans and public warnings only added fuel to the fire that is yet another cultural revolution. The 1950s saw a birth of numerous subcultures like bebop jazz fans, greasers who later influenced the biker subculture, and of course the Beat movement. Such alternative youth cultures were characterized by loyalty, sense of belonging and ideas much

greater than the individuals who started to them. With the sense of comfort and prosperity came a movement desperate for change, that wanted to see the world as it is and not as the media portrays it, for whatever cost.

## **2. The Beat Generation**

While post-war life in America was indeed filled with prosperity and ease, not everyone enjoyed that monotonous and predictable lifestyle. The youth was starting to rebel, they wanted to experience life in a more meaningful way, to explore the world and enjoy every aspect of their youth. As life often imitates art, those people found their sanctuary in a new culture that consisted of poets and novelists of their time, someone who they considered to be the voices of their generation. As every movement begins with an idea, the new rebellious subculture was no different. It was founded by William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac when they met in 1944 at the Columbia University in New York City (Prokeš 4). They saw the world in a different way, as a place that is filled with the lasting consequences of terrifying events like the Holocaust and global warfare. They considered the new enthusiastic vision of the world to be naïve, conventional, and morbid. The whole idealistic vision of the global situation was fake in their eyes, so they decided to portray it as they believed it truly was. Their writing style was authentic, daring, and uncompromisingly true to their beliefs. This rebellious lifestyle, while frowned upon by the majority of the population, attracted the youth and the people from the outskirts of life, rejected by the society. The American society after World War II was split between “the normal majority and the deviant minority, which included everyone from junkies and gay people to African-Americans and immigrants” (Russell 9). Those people shared the same joy of “getting the kicks” as the Beat poets, which further strengthened the bond and loyalty between the artists and their followers, resulting in a closely-knit community of outcasts and bohemians.

To better understand the literature and the people associated with it, it is important to have a strong grasp on the history of the movement. As previously stated, the Beat movement was founded by Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac in 1944. It is said that Jack Kerouac was the one who called Ginsberg, Burroughs, and his friends “The Beat Generation” and is considered to be the person who came up with the name for the movement (Russell 10). Russell further claims that the term “Beat” existed before Kerouac used it in this

context, as it had been used in the African American jazz community for a long time and it means exhausted or broke (10). With that said, the Beat poets did not use the word in that context, but rather to signify “a combination of both exhaustion and empowerment” (Russell 11). Kerouac did not see something described with that word to be depressed and tired of life, but as something that also challenged the oppressive world around it, using that tiredness to fight back and prove their point in which they firmly believed. The movement slowly but surely gained notoriety, both in the underground community as well as in the media, so the people who indulged in that kind of life were called Beatniks. The main ideas that connected them were the rejection of conformity, hatred toward consumerism, and love for all kinds of art, ranging from literature and painting to music and film. Another thing that Beatniks enjoyed was losing themselves on the outskirts of society, ghettos, old bars, and typically less appealing places. They would go to “get their kicks,” which is a term commonly used in their culture and can be seen in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and one of its protagonists, Dean Moriarty. To get the kicks means to get enjoyment, or rather search enjoyment, which goes hand in hand with Beats’ hedonistic lifestyle. They would get lost in the joy of trying out everything, especially things that were considered taboo at the time like drugs, crime, homosexual sex, and interracial relationships. They knew that using drugs and drinking themselves to blackout every day was bad for them, but they did not care. They wanted to enjoy life and not worry about tomorrow. That kind of indulgence was especially present in the lives of artists. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs are perfect examples of such life:

Burroughs felt most comfortable in the hustler world of Times Square and teamed up with authentic petty thief Herbert Huncke to score for drugs while funding his habit through a combination of his family’s \$200 a month allowance and ‘working the hole’ (robbing drunks on the subways). Kerouac experimented with a variety of stimulants and eventually became addicted to Benzedrine inhalers (bennies). Ginsberg, with the help of Neal Cassady, discovered the extent of his homosexuality. (Russell 11)

By being openly attracted to such taboo things and vices, the Beat writers directly influenced the way their followers, and later the wider young population, approach the exploration of freedom and hedonistic lifestyle. A decade later, with the rise of rock music, alternative cinema, and psychedelic drugs, the Beat Generation will be seen as the main influence on the hippie culture and the youth of the United States.

## 2.1. The Importance of Big Cities

While Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs met at the New York University, the hotspots of the movement were more widespread, with San Francisco and Los Angeles being the other two main cities. It is not a coincidence that these three major cities were seen as the places to be by the Beatniks since they were commonly used in the works of Jack Kerouac and others. In *On the Road*, Kerouac (in the character of Sal Paradise) travels from New York to San Francisco and Los Angeles, among other places, describing the cities in great detail. His descriptions were not just focused on the landmarks and the tourist-friendly side of those cities, but the people and their lives. Like in his visit to Los Angeles with Terry, his most detailed descriptions of the city were made during the night, when people would go out to enjoy the chaos of the rich nightlife the big city has to offer:

South Main Street, where Terry and I took strolls with hot dogs, was a fantastic carnival of lights and wildness. Booted cops frisked people on practically every corner. The beatest characters in the country swarmed on the sidewalks - all of it under those soft Southern California stars that are lost in the brown halo of the huge desert encampment LA really is. You could smell tea, weed, I mean marijuana, floating in the air, together with the chili beans and beer. That grand wild sound of bop floated from beer parlors; it mixed medleys with every kind of cowboy and boogie-woogie in the American night. (Kerouac 52)

Not only are these cities interesting to the Beatniks for their inclusion in the works, but also because of the rich nightlife. Huge concrete buildings and hidden basement bars were the most attractive places for them, not only because of the vices, but also because of the diversity of characters that small towns and places could not offer. These places were used as the melting pot for the likeminded people to connect and enjoy the works of their favorite writers. During the 1950s the American society tried to fight the idea of subcultures because it was afraid of the ideas the young members of such cultures had to offer. One of such subcultures was clearly the Beat movement with its anti-traditionalist ideas and visions. Obviously, they were not gladly accepted by the community and it was hard for them to find people that had the same vision and ideas, so “the Beats created a space for themselves in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco by establishing the base of a counterculture” (Cosma 23). It is important to note that New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco were used as the focal points of many movements, and not just the Beats. Therefore, the culture of rebellion, individualism, and independence

plays a huge amount in their histories. Cosma in his article describes the three cities by saying that New York is “often seen as more rigid and conventional” and that it is often criticized by the groups from the other cities. San Francisco on the other hand is seen “as a city with heritage-oriented values” (24) which groups and artists value and often cite as an influence in their works. While other groups would frequently criticize other places and their home cities would play a large role in the shaping of their personalities, the Beats were different. Most of them came from New York and spent their lives in San Francisco or Los Angeles, but they did not forget where they came from. Them living in both West and East Coast cities only enriched their stories and provided great inspiration for their creation, which is the reason why they would often enjoy writing detailed descriptions of their travels.

The travels play a large role in the Beat movement, both figuratively and metaphorically. They constantly search for something new, be it experiences or ideas. The vision of life as a long road with experiences being the places along the way is a metaphor used by Kerouac in *On the Road* and a mindset that all the Beatniks subscribe to. Not everything is about the destination, but the little moments we have along the road that help form the mosaic whole. William S. Burroughs implemented that idea in his work *Naked Lunch* which consists of little story vignettes that can be read in any order because they do not follow a traditional line of progression. While every vignette has its plot and meaning and they are meant to be read separately, but they also form a cohesive literature work when read as a whole. It is not uncommon for Beats to incorporate their life philosophies in their work, albeit in a more metaphorical sense, because a lot of their literary work is semi-, or even completely autobiographic. The entire world was an inspiration for them, to create something unique and daring. While big cities and underground communities shaped the face and the idea of the movement, one cannot deny the importance the other works of art had on the Beats, especially the music of the time.

## **2.2. Beats and Jazz**

Jazz music appeared at the end of the nineteenth century in New Orleans, Louisiana. Its roots can be found in blues and ragtime music, both of which are important parts of the African American culture. It was something novel, wild, and unpredictable. Complex chord shapes, chromatic melody runs, and polyrhythms are some of the unique elements that made jazz attractive to musicians, especially those of color because it was something exclusive to them.

Artists like Louis Armstrong, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis are some of the most important musicians of their age and they all played an important part in the creation and popularization of jazz music. As art evolves over time, jazz produced a number of subgenres, the most important being bebop, which is a much faster version of jazz that relies even more on improvisation and playing in the moment. However, those characteristics do not only apply to music, but to the people who are part of the bebop culture. That was a new, interesting thing and a lot of young people were attracted to explore the genre and go to live shows. Therefore, it is not surprising that Beat writers were fans of jazz, and more specifically, bebop music.

The Beats enjoyed the improvisational aspect of the genre, as well as the culture behind it. For them, “bop provided a model for registering the rhythms of contemporary American life” (Hrebeniak 250). Jazz musicians shared the same idea as Beat writers that chance and creating in the moment give the most freedom, which would not be possible if the art was planned carefully. Allen Ginsberg’s famous saying “[f]irst thought, best thought” (qtd. in Hrebeniak 251) perfectly sums up the Beats’ vision of art and creating. It is about putting the unfiltered, untampered idea on paper, not obsessing about the little details and insignificant errors, for that is not improvisation but careful creation. Kerouac stated at the start of *Mexico City Blues* “I want to be considered a jazz poet,” (1) showing his love and admiration for jazz music, but also great knowledge of the genre. Throughout *On the Road*, Kerouac references various jazz musicians like Lester Young and Roy Eldridge, uses the slang that is only used by the musicians of the genre, as well as he describes the atmosphere of jazz shows with great joy and enthusiasm, making the readers feel as if they are a part of that small, selected crowd: “Boom, kick, that drummer was kicking his drums down the cellar and rolling the beat upstairs with his murderous sticks ... The pianist was only pounding the keys with spread-eagled fingers, chords, at intervals when the great tenorman was drawing breath for another blast - Chinese chords, shuddering the piano in every timber, chink, and wire, boing” (Kerouac 115). To further portray his connection with the genre, Kerouac wrote *On the Road* as a scroll because his writing was so fast he did not want to interrupt his workflow by constantly replacing the paper, much like jazz musicians who composed their music “on the spot,” during their improvisations and not at their homes carefully selecting the chords of a song. By making art that way, artists get in the state of flow, when they are extremely concentrated and do not think about anything. They just create and the result is pure passion and creative freedom. Dean Moriarty explains that idea the night after him and Sal went to a jazz show:



Now, man, that alto man last night had IT ... Up to him to put down what's on everybody's mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of a chorus he gets it – everybody look up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. (Kerouac 120)

Beats, much like jazz musicians, were accustomed to small, grimy places. Jazz was not a mainstream genre of music, but it had a cult following in the underground community. Since they did not have a wide reach, their shows would usually take place in small bars or basements that were filled with dedicated fans. Sweat, joy, and passion were present at every show, which is something that was missing with the more commercially successful artists. Beat community was similar to jazz in that sense. To them, it did not matter where they would gather, or how much of them would gather. All that mattered was the joy of creating, reading their work, and sharing the moment with likeminded individuals. In both jazz and beat communities, that was the point of not only art, but life in general. To improvise and live in the moment, not be bounded by overthinking, self-censorship, and the fear of being discarded by the society. That was the idea that excited them the most, “an application of procedures that yields no predictive results” (Hrebeniak 259). With that many similarities between the two, seemingly unmatchable communities, it would be surprising if they did not both suffer the similar fate. The end of 1950s saw the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, which took over the mainstream. Naturally, jazz musicians were influenced by the new musical inventions like the electric guitar and bass, which changed the way jazz sounded. New subgenres emerged, some of them taking heavy inspiration from rock ‘n’ roll, but by the end of the 1960s, the sound of the old jazz music was left in the past. The Beat literature experienced similar fate, with the movement dying out by the of the 1960s. While these movements may be in the past, their influence on modern art and society in general is still visible today, with many young artists directly quoting the great Beat figures as influences on their creation.

### **3. The Influence of Beat Literature on the American Society**

Whether scholars like the Beat Generation or not, one cannot deny the influence their literature had on the society. The general population of the United States in the 1940s and 1950s was predominantly against the ideas that Beat writers were preaching and portraying in their works.

They were directly opposing the general mindset that was present in the American society of the time, challenging the tradition, and seeking the truth. Scholars of the time would often downplay their importance in the literary sphere and present them as nothing more but failed amateurs or delinquents, with quotes like “the failure of the Beats as literary artists has little to do with their widely publicized moral depravity and social negativism” (Scott 150). They were also seen as people who were stuck in adolescence, not moving on from the so-called youth fling. Even their reverence for artists like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau was watered down in meaning by stating that they did not in fact like them “but an image of Whitman and Thoreau distorted by the eyes of adolescence” (Scott 151). While such claims may sound humorous, the people at the time believed that Beat writers would take their youth and make them delinquents. The idea behind such drastic claims is that the Beatniks were adult people who were no longer teenagers, but wanted to live their life as if they were. They thought that the works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and other Beats were just naïve visions of the world that cannot exist, equating the movement with phrases like “American teen cult.”

While the adult population showed strong dislike of the Beats, and even ridiculed them, young people saw their ideas as something valuable and worth exploring. Their influence was visible not only in the arts, but also in the mindset of young people. Their ideas like the rejection of materialism, the search for peace and transcendence seen in the Eastern religions, and the commitment to environment, sparked a number of ideas in young people who stood up to fight for their own beliefs: “[a]s an influential trend and a strong force on the social scene, the Beatniks were an inspiration for different cultural and social movements, like the Civil Rights Movement or the Hippie movement” (Tomakić 8). Spiritualism played an important part in their works, presenting their will to find the true meaning of life, as well as to “reclaim the original shape of man since man in a mechanized world lost touch with his inner being” (Tomakić 8). Groups like the Hippies took heavy inspiration from Beats in that regard, travelling all over the world to find the thing that their heroes were writing about. The Beats also promoted education, but not necessarily in the conventional way. They believed in educating themselves and reading things they were interested in, not what the school system believed was needed to be learnt. Even the most well-known Beats lived by that principle, like Ginsberg who “read everything he could get his hands on – as though driven by an insatiable need for endless ideas and systems of thought, and as though his intelligence would die of hunger unless he went on feeding it books” (Raskin 46). The influence of Beat literature on the American society was enormous. Their way of life was speaking to the younger generation and they were the voices of outcasts; people living on the edge of society.

While no one work can be singled out as the most important of the movement, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* are considered to be the most influential pieces of Beat literature, inspiring young artists to this day with their interesting structures, shocking imagery and masterful descriptions.

### **3.1. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road***

Kerouac's *On the Road* is a novel that presented not only the life of Beatniks to the masses, but the term "Beat" itself. He used the term in the novel to describe characters like Dean Moriarty who spent their lives moving around the country, not being able to hold steady jobs and not being worried about the future. He "defined the term as crushed, beaten or poor" (Nicoletti 4), describing the very essence of the movement and the visions of his contemporaries. Kerouac would often downplay the importance of the term and even express his hatred for the phrase "the Beat Generation." While he saw being called a Beatnik as something offensive, other writers like Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs "promoted the use of the term" (Nicoletti 4). *On the Road* played a significant role in the Beats' history, being the most well-known novel of the period, presenting stream-of-consciousness way of writing in an accessible format of a roman à clef. All the major characters in the novel are Kerouac's friends whose names had to be changed (alongside with the downplaying of certain explicit and obscene scenes) in order to get the novel published. Kerouac had trouble writing the novel because he was struggling with the constant need to change the paper. After some time, he managed to customize his writing machine so he was able to continuously write. The product was the original scroll version of the novel, which took six years to get published after many alternations. It follows a character Sal Paradise (Jack Kerouac) and his series of trips over the continent. He is accompanied by a crazy, larger-than-life character called Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady), who is the embodiment of a Beatnik. Along the way they meet up with their friends Old Bull Lee (William S. Burroughs), Carlo Marx (Allen Ginsberg), Elmer Hassel (Herbert Huncke), and others.

The novel follows Kerouac's adventures with Cassady, who was "certainly an inspiration to Kerouac because Cassady was the very person Kerouac wanted his alter ego to be" (Nicoletti 9). Neal Cassady was a true Beatnik, always on the run, trying to the most out of life, and was an inspiration for other Beat writers such as Ginsberg. He was the embodiment of the movement, something all of them strived to become. He is also noted to be a big part of the

reason why they were considered dangerous or delinquent, associating the movement with drugs and pleasure seeking.

The vivid imagery and detailed descriptions of Sal and Dean's constant search for "the kicks," crazy nights out and interesting characters along the way served as a window into their world. It was a perfect portrayal of the nomad, simple life the Beats were preaching in their works, giving everyone an opportunity to experience it and hopefully join them. While Kerouac rarely made comments about the government, *On the Road* had a number of political statements, one of which was Old Bull Lee's speech about the consumerist-oriented society, in which everything is made to be replaced and nothing is built to last:

Why, Sal, do you realize the shelves they build these days crack under the weight of knickknacks after six months or generally collapse? Same with houses, same with clothes. These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last forever. And tires. Americans are killing themselves by the millions every year with defective rubber tires that get hot on the road and blow up. They could make tires that never blow up ... They prefer making cheap goods so's everybody'll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow. (Kerouac 88)

After the World War II, the United States of America was in a prosperous era in which its citizens had jobs and money to spend. With such high production levels, consumer numbers had to soar. The media and the government encouraged a new way of life in which people should spend their hard-earned money to treat themselves and their families, further funding the production and therefore boosting the economy. Products were made cheaply so they could be easily replaced, which is exactly what Kerouac and his contemporaries were criticizing.

The novel also puts its protagonists in position where they are often found between the "regular" part of the society and the bohemian groups: "Sal and Dean meet both parts of American society, the one limited with working hours, suspicious police offices, scared of communist attack and the other which maintained its carefree nature, driven wild by jazz and rock music, unwilling to bow down to constraints of American politics in the 1950s" (Prokeš 13). This direct comparison between the two groups of people helped put their vision and life in the perspective of the society. Beats were often criticized for spending their lives in a constant haze of alcohol and drugs, entirely omitting their main goal, which was to live their lives

without the shackles of consumerism, censorship and tradition. By putting their lives in the context of the 1950s America, the image of the movement is entirely different.

Another important aspect of the novel is the presentation of taboo topics like drugs and sex in a real, uncensored way. At the time, America was a highly conservative nation which feared the unknown and would reject anyone who did not fit in. Kerouac's integration of everything that was considered taboo at the time in *On the Road* not only gained the Beat movement trust and interest of young people, but also highlighted the problem of censorship and conformity in the United States. Finally, the foundational theme of the novel is traveling and the search for something spiritual: "Sal and Dean are not travelling to gain any kind of material wealth, but spiritual growth and experience" (Prokeš 14). The concept of learning about oneself and searching for intangible things is often lost in the modern society. Everyone is constantly worried about money and their careers that it is easy to forget what really matters. This spiritual way of living life is common in the Beat community because it is directly related to Eastern religions, which Beat writers studied and were a part of.

With *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac presented the main ideas of the Beat movement to the masses, critiqued the way modern society worked, challenged the norm by describing the taboo topics in great detail, but also presented an unfiltered, real image of the American society in the 1950s. Even though certain people were offended by the novel and saw it as an attack on the American values, it was a great commercial success and it "had a major impact upon American youth at the time and soon it reached the status of a classic" (Prokeš 8).

### **3.2. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl***

In 1955, Allen Ginsberg released his extremely controversial and daring poem *Howl*, which is the most direct and brutal critique of the 1950s America. The goal he wished to accomplish with the poem was to "wake Americans from what seemed like a narcotized slumber" (Raskin 121). In the 1950s, Americans did not hear negative news regarding their government or their way of life. Reality was presented to them through rose-colored glasses, carefully feeding them what the media considered to be important for building the perfect society. Beats fought against that dystopian idea of the media-controlled society the best way they could – by creating art.

While Kerouac's *On the Road* was oriented more toward the Beatnik way of life, Ginsberg's *Howl* was like a gunshot in the heart of the American society. Ginsberg's ultimate literary goal

was to “tell the truth in poetry in his own way – to scream it in a uniquely American way” (Raskin 122). He knew that by publishing such controversial work he was making himself an outcast, a person that was considered dangerous and should not be tolerated. One of the characteristics of Beat writers is their persistence and integrity. He was not concerned by his appearance or his status in the society, he saw his ideas as more important and worth pursuing. However, creating for Ginsberg was a challenge not only because of the outside pressure, but because of his internal struggles and dilemmas as well. One of his personal heroes was T.S. Eliot, an avant-garde poet from the 1920s. While he was boundary-pushing at his time, he believed that not every generation of poets should be concerned with revolutionizing the art. That statement put Ginsberg in a difficult position because “on the one hand, he wanted to extend Eliot’s tradition” but “on the other hand, he was eager to break from Eliot’s tradition and write in the hipster argot used by Neal Cassady and Herbert Huncke – to bring words like “dig” and “Daddio” in his poetry” (Raskin 85). He also shared Kerouac’s vision and wanted to write like jazz musicians, not bound by typical literary rules and creating untampered art on the spot.

Being torn between honoring his idols and joining his contemporaries, Ginsberg was in an artistic limbo. The change happened after his arrest in 1949. At the time, Ginsberg was letting Herbert Huncke and his friends store stolen items in his apartment. He thought highly about Huncke, but witnessing his downfall and using hard drugs led him to realization that no man is perfect. He had fled the apartment and went to his brother’s home where the police arrested him, which “was the decisive event in his life, the moment when he was initiated into the company of the Beats” (Raskin 88). By living that kind of life, his mental state was deteriorating. He wanted to move from New York and go to California, even though his friends told him not to go. Finally, in 1954, he arrived in California. The trip helped him gain self-confidence and find his identity: “When he arrived in California in 1954, he had a new sense of pride about his own manhood, and for the first time he identified himself as an American poet in the tradition of Whitman” (Raskin 119). Finally, releasing *Howl* in 1955 was “the turning point of Ginsberg’s career” (Russell 36). Wild, grotesque imagery present in the poem was nothing short of terrifying, yet inspiring. The government saw the poem as dangerous, banning it in the entire country, but it was too late. The effects were irreversible. The culmination was on 7 October 1955 during the public reading of the poem at the San Francisco Six Gallery, which was the moment Ginsberg “secured a reputation as one of America’s foremost young poets” (Russell 36).

In the opening of *Howl*, Ginsberg presents the reader with an eerie image of the America in which Beats lived in, dark and morbid:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection  
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night. (1-5)

The intensity of the descriptions increases throughout the poem, leaving readers shocked and disturbed, but also mesmerized. The structure blurs the line between poetry and prose, making *Howl* “much more overwhelming in its relentless barrage of detail, so much more panoramic in its scope, so much more transformative in its ambition” (Tytell 640) than other modern poems that focused on one certain event. It was not only a poem but a growl of the young generation that has been pressured by the conservative establishment. While it is a rebellious masterpiece in itself, *Howl* is a work of art that is at its best when it is read aloud, as seen in Ginsberg’s infamous reading of the poem: “It would take Ginsberg over twenty minutes to read the entire poem, and its leaping momentum is in part also a function of the potential of the long line, a line as long as his breath would permit, resulting in an expression that was as much performative as printed on a page” (Tytell 643). The rage that is contained within the lines of the poem comes alive, electrifying the audience and brutally presents them with an unfiltered, awesome portrayal of their reality. The reason why the poem was so hard-hitting is because Ginsberg is a part of the same society as his audience. They understood his words because he spoke for them, and he understood the people.

*Howl* features a number of American heroes, like “rebels, frontiersmen, and rugged individuals,” and “for the poet to become popular hero, he must ‘contain’ America” (Selby 64). Beats had their own style of talking, their own slang which made them unique. It was a type of communication that was specific to their group, which makes them appealing to their followers. Their vision “liberates language from America’s harsh conformities,” which made them interesting to young people (Selby 67). Ginsberg especially, being a homosexual and an artist, was seen as a poet-hero because he came from a certain culture and his way of writing was inspired directly by the demands of that culture. He was hiding his homosexuality and his letters to other men from the public because he did not want to get labeled. After the 1949 arrest and

his move to the West Coast, he found his true self. He was not afraid of the public's visions of him. He saw it as his duty to speak out about the horrors and injustice he had seen in the world, making him an icon of the generation. The media hated him and presented him as a dangerous delinquent, but his influence is undeniable. In the following decades he was an important part of anti-war protests, gay rights movements, and social justice groups. He was unapologetically himself and young people were inspired by him to stand up for what they believed in. *Howl* stands as one of the most important literary works of the twentieth century and Ginsberg's prophetic visions presented in the poem are still relevant today.

### **3.3. William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch***

If *Howl* was a stab at the American government, *Naked Lunch* was at the American society and values. Much like the other two great Beat literary works, Burroughs' 1959 novel faced a lot of controversy and censorship when it was first published. Describing certain aspects of Burroughs' life, *Naked Lunch* deals with topics like drugs, homosexuality, addiction, and rejection. As it is mentioned, the United States of America in the 1950s was a predominantly conservative country and publishing works with such topics was unheard of. The novel had to undergo numerous changes to get published in America, and even stripped down it caused a strong outrage, both from the government and the public. However, the discussions made around the novel were seldom constructive, with people either describing it as "the sacred text or the abomination of desolation for the hippie generation" (McConnell 666). The fans of the novel saw it as a groundbreaking work of art because of the techniques used by Burroughs, like the cut-up technique and the presentation of the story in a series of vignettes, or as Burroughs called them "routines." The idea was that readers could read the novel in whatever order they wanted, not having to follow the typical composition (Avidar-Walzer). On the other hand, the dissenters of the novel saw it as inappropriate, confusing, and needlessly graphic. While some of the arguments made against the book can be seen as true, underneath its graphic surface *Naked Lunch* is a serious social and political commentary, visible only to those who access it with an open mind. It presents the ways the American government treats its people and keeps them under control, influencing their minds and labeling the social outcasts as the unwanted part of the society:

As the title suggests, Burroughs uses the novel to unveil (make naked) the mechanisms of control and repression that rule American society. Burroughs



shows how the law and the health authorities persecute both addicts and homosexuals, and turns this persecution into a mad vision of hell. It's both a warning against drug addiction and a critique of society's treatment of those branded undesirable. (Russell 51)

The genius of *Naked Lunch* lies not only in the written, but the implied as well. Burroughs critiques the society and the readiness to discard people who do not fit inside the molds created by it, as well as the conformity and materialism visible in the people of the time. Capitalism and the consumer culture are common targets in Beat works, and that is especially the case in *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs described one of the places in the novel, Interzone, as “the dreamscape of late capitalism” (Breu 208). Interzone is Tangier's international zone, and it highlights the problems of globalization, the false promises of the giant nations to smaller countries, which eventually become victims of capitalism and money. Burroughs also critiques the medical system through the character of Dr. Benway who performs immoral experiments on his patients. For example, he performed an operation in front of an audience in an auditorium and said the operation “has absolutely no medical value” (Burroughs 34). He does not see the meaning in that particular operation, yet he performs it anyway and purposefully endangers the patient's life just to save him, comparing himself with a bull fighter: “Just as a bull fighter with his skill and knowledge and extricates himself from danger he has himself invoked, so in this operation the surgeon deliberately endangers his patient, and then, with incredible speed and celerity, rescues him from death at the last possible split second” (Burroughs 34). As stated previously, none of the claims were made directly in the novel but implied through descriptions and imagery, earning the novel a cult following among younger readers and more democratically oriented population. These claims went directly against the ideas of the 1950s American society, so it is clear why it faced such backlash and hatred.

Not only did it critique the mainstream way of life and the ideas of the nation, but also presented people which were seen as outcasts in a neutral light, dealing with taboo topics and challenging the traditional vision of such things. The most direct critique the novel holds is the infamous “Naked Mr. America” passage from Hassan's Rumpus Room. It is a depraved, distorted description of an orgy Hassan organized but in its violent lines, a grotesque portrayal of the American society and its values can be seen: “Naked Mr. America, burning frantic with self bone love, screams out: “my asshole confounds the Louvre! I fart ambrosia and shit pure gold turds” My cock spurts soft diamonds in the morning sunlight” (Burroughs 41). The monologue sparked numerous controversies, both from scholars and the wider population.

Burroughs presented that shocking picture to the readers and challenged what people considered normal, repulsive, or simply disturbing. It presents the question why these lines trigger such reactions, making the readers re-evaluate their foundational values and explore the dark parts of their psyche. Such dramatic descriptions and frequent mentioning of taboo topics like drugs and sex made *Naked Lunch* one of the most infamous novels in American literary history.

The novel follows a series of events in which the main character William Lee, Burroughs' alter ego, finds himself. Lee is a drug addict who is constantly on the run for his next fix, much like Burroughs was at that time. His stories would take place in the United States, Mexico, and Tangier which played an important part in Burroughs' life, and the strange place called Interzone. Burroughs himself visited all those places and they all hold significance in the context of his literary work. As stated, Beats took major inspiration from their environment, constantly on the move and on the hunt for the next source of creativity and vision. In 1951, Burroughs accidentally killed his wife while intoxicated and on the advice of his lawyer moved to Tangier in Morocco. His life there was fine since he lived in anonymity and could indulge in vices he could not in the United States. He stayed in contact with his friends via letters and sent them vignettes which he often wrote intoxicated. Writing those vignettes while under the effect of various drugs is one of the reasons why *Naked Lunch* has the unusual style of writing.

The next major point in his life was moving to Paris in 1958, where the novel eventually got published in 1959. However, the publication in the United States was far more complicated since the novel got banned and "got entangled in the same headline-grabbing legal battle that Ginsberg had faced over *Howl and Other Poems*" (Russell 47). Over the years Burroughs would get obsessed with new methods of writing like the cut-up method which is based on cutting up newspaper headlines and lines from other pieces of literature and taping them together to form new sentences. Burroughs believed that the cut-ups "could induce experiences similar to drug highs and might even operate as a means of freeing the individual from unspecified controlling forces" (Russell 47).

With his return to the United States, he came around to enjoying his fame and was seen as an icon in the art milieu. Musicians, painters and writers quoted him as an inspiration and saw him as a legend of the twentieth century literature and popular culture. He was giving college readings in New York and started to hang out with celebrities like Andy Warhol, Patti Smith, and the Rolling Stones. His presence in such circles made him "the epitome of 1970s junkie chic," an underground culture icon (Russell 48). He eventually started using heroin again and

moved to a small town in the Mid-West. Even though he was the eldest of the three Beat icons, he outlived them both, dying in 1997.

#### 4. The Beat Generation in the Popular Culture

After the three major releases and numerous controversies, the Beat movement got out of the obscurity and gained a more substantial following. People that were not a part of the movement started enjoying their works because they finally acknowledged their literary and political importance. The youth, on the other hand, liked the idea of their lifestyle. The rebellious attitude and the drama that constantly followed them were appealing and inspiring to teenagers. Even after the movement's heyday, their legacy and ideas continued to live on and inspire numerous countercultures over the decades, mainly the Hippies.

In the 1970s and 1980s, famous punk and rock musicians not only quoted the Beats as their heroes but also spent time in their company. Bob Dylan, for example, had a close working relationship with Ginsberg, collaborating with him on a number of projects, most of which never got officially released. The Beat Generation's influence reached over the ocean as well. The Beatles named themselves after the movement: "The 'a' in The Beatles, for example, is a reference to the Beat Generation" (Luyten 9). Jim Morrison often stated that Jack Kerouac was his favorite writer and Iggy Pop incorporated phrases William Burroughs' novel *The Ticket that Exploded* in his song "Lust for Life." Such strong connection between the Beats and rock musicians is not surprising in the slightest since there are many similarities between the movements. Both rockers and Beatniks came from the same rebellious background and were both seen as social outcasts. They also both criticized the government and extremely conservative values of the society at the time, as well as incorporated taboo topics like sex and drugs in their art.

The Beats' influence on the popular culture does not end with music, as there are strong connections between the movement and the cinema. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* incorporates ideas of several film movements, most importantly cinéma vérité, which "often catches the people in the poem in very private moments" (Howard 12). He was a fan of the modern cinema, praising avant-garde cinematography which elements can be seen in the way he described people in *Howl*. At the time, same ideas were present in alternative filmmaking and the Beat literature,

so the influences the two had on each other are strong. While the movements shared numerous similarities, the most prominent is considered to be their expression of “universal tolerance:”

Besides the Beats’ acceptance of people from all backgrounds, races, and sexualities, “Howl’s” incorporation of various cinematic influences also demonstrates a more intellectual and ideological openness completely accepting of these different artistic mediums and styles while also being unafraid to stretch the boundaries of formal poetry. It is also important to note that Underground Film’s influence on Ginsberg and his writing of “Howl” represents just one side of a mutually beneficial artistic exchange. (Howard 13)

The influence the Beats had on popular culture was significant as they were present in every corner of art and society, but over the years the Beat essence started to fade away. The media that once used them as scapegoats for every negative occurrence in the country now saw them as a financial possibility. As Weinreich states, “a telling moment occurred in the mid-1990s when Kerouac and Ginsberg wore khakis for The Gap, and Burroughs endorsed Nike” (263). While they were still seen as writers and rebels, over the years they also acquired the status of cultural icons, which means their image and legacy could sell products. By the end of the 1990s, all three of the major Beat writers had passed away and companies saw the business potential in marketing their names to young, rebellious people. The faces of cultural revolutionaries were transformed into mere fashion advertisements and young people spent their money to look like their idols. Long lost were the anti-materialistic and spiritual ideas of Allen Ginsberg, the adventures of rebellious yet charismatic Neal Cassady, and Jack Kerouac’s daring journeys into the unknown. While one may argue that people, as they age, lose the will to fight for the ideas they once believed in, the irony in this case cannot be overlooked. The entire movement was founded on the very notion that the pursue of material things is ruining the society and its connection to the spiritual side of life, and yet decades later the very same people who once preached those ideas could be seen on the covers of the magazines selling the products made by multimillion-dollar corporations to the people. While looking at those promotional photos, one cannot help but to ask what even means to be beat? While the founders of the movement may have changed their views, be it because of the pressure of the society or because of their own will, “the definition, however oblique, may hold true for the beat legacy” (Weinreich 268). The question reappears every so often when a celebrity tries to own a part of the Beat history, like when seeing the photos of “the actor Johnny Depp purchasing Jack’s raincoat and lumberjack shirt” (Weinreich 268). Some may see it as the passing of the torch, while others

may argue that it is just the case of out of touch celebrities trying to portray themselves as rebels. Whatever the case may be, it is undeniable that the influence and power of the Beat movement is still visible today. The people behind every movement change, but the ideas they set remain and inspire future generations, long after they are gone.

## 5. Conclusion

The Beat Generation lived fast and burnt away even faster. Their period in time is characterized by numerous controversies, exploration of the taboo and life on the edge of existence. While certain scholars and more traditional people see them as nothing more than delinquents and hedonists, their importance in the context of history is undeniable. They saw reality as it truly was and they were not afraid to speak their mind, even if it cost them everything. They created and existed in their own community, where everyone shared the same vision of a non-materialistic society that is focused on more significant things in life, the intangible. Writers like Burroughs and Ginsberg found new ways to write and create, with the famous cut-up technique and the long, epic poem influenced by avant-garde cinematography and the society of the time. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* gives the readers a glimpse of the Beatnik lifestyle, always on the road and trying to "get the kicks," to enjoy life to the fullest. While writers of the older generations neglected their work as amateurish and confusing, the Beats influenced a whole generation of young people who moved on to create some of the most famous counterculture movements in the history of the United States. Artists from the other branches of creative expression enjoyed their company and were influenced by the Beats. Musicians collaborated with them, and film directors incorporated their creative techniques into their own workflow. Today, the influence of the Beat Generation is just as strong as it was seventy years ago, and the works of these rebellious thrill seekers became an important part of the literary history of the United States of America.

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