

# On the Road: 50 Years of the Beatniks

## ON THE ROAD: 50 YEARS OF THE BEATNIKS 1

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### Overview

The Beat movement, also called the Beat Generation describes an American social and literary movement that originated in the 1950s. Its adherents, also known as Beatniks expressed their alienation from conventional or "square" society by adopting an almost uniform style of seedy dress, manners, and vocabulary. Beat poets sought to liberate poetry from academic preciosity and bring it back to the streets; the verse was frequently chaotic and liberally sprinkled with obscenities but often times ruggedly powerful and moving.

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is an example of spontaneous prose and also Kerouac's last effort to obey the dictates of novelistic tradition. Often considered a defining work of the Beat movement, this book was chosen by Time Magazine as one of the 100 best English language novels from 1923 to 2005.

*The Dharma Bums*, also by Kerouac is a semi-fictional, partly autobiographical novel accounts events that occurred after *On the Road*. The book largely concerns the duality in Kerouac's life and ideals; written with spontaneous flow of thought and phrase that critics have both praised and ridiculed. The classical structure of *The Dharma Bums* is important to both style and meaning.

Allen Ginsberg's epic poem, *Howl*, is considered to be one of the most significant products of the Beat movement and was also the subject of a censorship trial at which a series of poets and professors persuaded the court that the book was not obscene.

William S. Burroughs' *Junky* was Burroughs' first novel, and has come to be considered a seminal text on the lifestyle of heroin addicts in the early 1950's and is the rebellion of the disaffected insider.

### On the Road

I wasn't sure what to expect from our discussion of *On the Road*. I had never led a book discussion group before, and I was a little anxious at the outset. I'm happy to report that the group quickly relaxed me with their open and earnest participation.

We began with introductions. As it turned out, one of the participants was at the meeting almost accidentally – he was on the road and the girl he was with had seen the flyer for the discussion and had mentioned it to him. He said that he had read the novel and that he had spent some time hitch-hiking across the country. At various times throughout the evening, he illuminated our discussion with stories and verifications that (if I may speak for the group) helped us to see the events of the story better.

Next I showed a clip from a hip little film called *The Source*. In the clip we were introduced to Kerouac and Corso, Burroughs and Ginsberg, Snyder and Huncke. I chose the clip primarily for a section wherein Kerouac, speaking in French, describes the meaning of "Beat" for a French Canadian reporter. I thought Kerouac's description of "Beat" and its duality – "'beat' as in beaten, exhausted, spent" as coined by Huncke, and "'beat' as in beatitude" – would be helpful as we started thinking about this movement.

Perhaps understandably, therefore, our discussion of the novel began broadly and generally as we began to share our understandings of what it means to be Beat and our perceptions of the movement's enduring influences on American life today.

From there we moved on to questions about the novel's syntax. We spoke of Kerouac's first (failed) attempts to write the book in a style more imitative of Thomas Wolfe or Theodore Dreiser and of his attempts to free himself from what Harold Bloom calls "the anxiety of influence." And then we looked at clip of Kerouac describing his new, jazzy style to Steve Allen. We spoke briefly of Kerouac's speedy composition process and about "first thought, best thought," as crucial to this new style. A couple of us chuckled about a few of the bumpier spots in the book and wondered about the role of Benzedrine in these rough patches of road.

Next we looked at the character of Sal Paradise and Kerouac's original idea to make Smitty (Sal) and Red (Dean) parallel Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. While few in the group had read Cervantes, the topic opened the door to looking more deeply at Sal and Dean. Why is Sal so sad all the time? Is the sadness really in all those places he said were sad (Denver, for example)? And although he spends the book shambling after Dean and seeming like a side-kick, isn't this book really about Sal?

Certainly, we decided, Dean helps to reveal Sal. And just as certainly, the charismatic con-man/genius/madman is drawn carefully enough to make him dangerous – capable of both benevolence and treachery, which makes him a crucial transmitter of tension for the novel. To gain a better understanding of Dean's character, we watched a short montage of Neal Cassady and his interactions with Beat writers. One writer describes Cassady's body as the instrument of Cassady's art. In that sense, we see Cassady as genius – as the action of Cassady's body, his life, becomes the text or medium of his art. In another section, Cassady converses with Ginsberg about the Pentagon and those who are running the country. As Ginsberg asks a probing follow-up question, Cassady

glibly maneuvers away from a substantive answer, answering generally and dismissively, like a con-man.

This exploration of Neal/Dean prompted one member to speculate about whether or not Neal suffered from fetal-alcohol syndrome. She stated that in the 1940's pre-natal medicine was too primitive to understand the devastating effects of alcohol use while pregnant, and she postulated that some of society's misfits may have suffered from undiagnosed fetal alcohol syndrome. While some group members seemed to mull this over, others seemed more resistant to this speculation. I brought up Han Shan, a kind of hero for at least one of the Beats (Snyder), and his solitary time on the mountain whose name he borrowed (Han Shan means "Cold Mountain"). I also mentioned Snyder's lonely summers as a fire lookout in the Sierras. Is it pathology that leads us away from others? Is there more to it than that? Does a monolithic society inspire rebellion and "radicalism"?

A few days later, I was still chewing on this, thinking of Wordsworth ("The World Is Too Much With Us") and Thoreau (Walden) and Yeats ("The Lake Isle of Innisfree") and Abbey (Desert Solitaire) ... And while it's true that each of them lived in situations that were more complex than they revealed in their works, their yearnings for freedom from society remain pure as they speak to us through those works. Perhaps such ruminations naturally lead us to explorations of conformity and its tyranny – something with which we're all familiar. As I write this, I'm thinking about human complexity, and for some reason, I hear Hamlet, "What a piece of work is a man ..."

We wrapped up our meeting with handouts: copies of two of Cassady's letters, "The Great Sex Letter" and the "Cherry Mary" letter. Then I provided a précis of The Dharma Bums, and Nicole helped with reminders about the poetry reading and the bus tour.

## **The Dharma Bums**

Our discussion of The Dharma Bums was about as well attended as On the Road, but several participants from the first meeting were absent. I imagined that our hitchhiking friend from the first meeting had gone "back to the freeway shoulders -- under the tough, old stars" (Snyder). I'm happy to report that our new arrivals, of course, were no less interesting and involved as those who were missing.

At the outset, I provided everyone with a list of characters' names and their real-life counterparts. We talked briefly about Henry Morley and John Montgomery – I mentioned that several Beat historians who had interviewed Montgomery found him to be just as incomprehensible as his fictional representation. Several group members seemed surprised to learn that Kerouac's rendering of Montgomery was most probably not exaggerated. "I thought I was missing something," someone said. I presented a little bio of Montgomery and then we went on to talk about some of the other central characters that we hadn't already met in some form in On the Road.

Next, I spent a little while talking about Snyder and some of his works. We looked at a couple of Cold Mountain poems (because they made an appearance in the novel), and at "I Went Into the Maverick Bar" (because of its insistence that there is "real work" involved in living as a dharma bum). Incidentally, I also provided the group with "Axe Handles," but I don't remember if we talked about it.

Finally, we launched into our discussion by acknowledging Japhy's contention that "comparisons are odious"; nevertheless, we proceeded to examine the similarities and differences between Ray and Sal. Some participants noted that Ray seemed much more mature than Sal. Others noted that Ray's spiritual awareness was a much fully developed dimension to Kerouac's fictional self.

The discussion of Ray's spiritual awareness took us to a much broader discussion of the work's spiritual focus. What is "the real work" as Snyder mentions in "Maverick Bar"?

We left -- onto the freeway shoulders -- under the tough, old stars –

In the shadow of bluffs I came back to myself,

To the real work, to "What is to be done."

What is to be done? There seemed to be some consensus that the "real work" was intrinsically spiritual, and that it involved (at least in part) changing the dominant socio-cultural-religious (American) paradigm. Wrapped up in this conundrum is the fact that the characters are young and still forging their identities. As I was thinking about this after the discussion I marveled at the changes the Beats were able to make; when I was younger I was told that "you can't change anything until you know who you are." Ray is clearly still learning who he is throughout the course of the book, and yet Kerouac's search for himself (as reflected in his works) seems to have inspired change. Hmm ... maybe it is "all about the journey." At the same time, I wondered if prolonged adolescence is a response to the increasing complexity of the post-modern world.

In any event, calling to mind the youth of the characters invited some scrutiny from the group. Some group members pointed out that the line between "spiritual" partying and plain old partying was blurry indeed. And just how spiritual was "yabyum," anyway? Couldn't this just be a bunch of young guys looking for novel ways of having a good time? A few of the participants seemed to agree that the characters weren't everything they thought they were – we even talked about the line that Japhy repeats ("Comparisons are odious"), and then we found places where the characters were nevertheless comparing themselves the rest of society.

We talked at length about Japhy and his "hardcore" attitudes toward mountain-climbing and Zen Buddhism. The fact that Kerouac includes the Zen encouragement to keep climbing (What should a man do when he reaches the top of a mountain?) invited speculation about Japhy's function in the architecture of the story. Is he a model for us (one of the "axe handles" that Snyder discusses in his

poem)? Is he a representation of the human longing for faith? He's much younger than Ray, but he seems so much wiser. Is Kerouac encouraging us to look toward the nation's youth for a path to enlightenment? We agreed that all of these were possibilities.

We ended with a reminder to look again at Kerouac's rendering of the Six Gallery reading in *The Dharma Bums* as preparation for reading "Howl."

After the discussion I began to think about Ray's quest and about Ezra Pound (another "axe," Snyder tells us). In *The Cantos*, Pound laments, "It will not cohere," realizing perhaps that his plan to create a poetic ideograph is impossible; the world is too complex to render and to contemplate all at once. Then I thought of Ray's prayer, "O Ray, the career of your life is like a raindrop in the illimitable ocean which is eternal awakenerhood. Why worry ever any more?"

Given the peaks and valleys of Ray's spiritual trek, is this a moment of coherence? Is this enlightenment at last? Is there a place where East meets West philosophically, a place where the Buddhist call to "return to the source" meets the Platonic return to the cave?

Wrestling with these questions on the sharp edge of an ontological fulcrum, I pause. My children are giggling in the living room, and outside the window, the sun has broken through the clouds.

"... quit meditating and quit thinking about koans ... instead learn how to go to sleep and wake up ..."

More giggling from the living room, the day growing brighter ... Only one word comes to mind:

"Blah."

I'm taking my kids outside to play.

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#### Lusk Discussion—*Dharma Bums*

We had a total of twelve participants. We began by discussing the basic principles of Buddhism and the ways in which the characters in the book put these into practice. We spent a lot of time dissecting the mountain climbing scene to explore Kerouac's notion of Zen Buddhism. We ended up agreeing that although Smith never makes it to the top, he represents the true Buddhist way of the middle path (right effort). Japhy seems to be portrayed as too ascetic (too tight) while Morty is too burdened with the baggage of materialism (too loose).

We also discussed at length the differences between Japhy and Dean Moriarty as literary heroes. They are extremely different as characters in the way they lead their lives, yet Kerouac is equally sympathetic to them both. A few discussants thought Moriarty to be a more likeable character because of his fly by the seat of his pants spontaneity and energy. Most, however, argued that Japhy's Zen spontaneity came across as less selfish and

hedonistic than Dean's and was therefore more noble, more beat in the religious sense.

Everyone was struck by the ending of the book where Smith says "Blah" to the mountain as he is leaving to go "back to the world." Here Smith seems like a true bodhisattva coming down the mountain to help others gain enlightenment.

## Howl

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Before we began our discussion of "Howl," I addressed a question that had been asked in the previous meeting – "How does the Walt Whitman quotation about cheering up slaves and horrifying foreign despots tie in to *The Dharma Bums*?" Not being all that familiar with Whitman (beyond "The Wound Dresser" and "Come Up from Fields, Father," for my War Literature class), I was stumped by the question. But the intervening month gave me plenty of time to read the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, wherein Whitman says the attitude of great poets (among other things) is "to cheer up slaves and horrify foreign despots." After reading the preface, I saw that the line from Whitman to the Beats is unmistakable. It was nice to see that one member's question could provide for us a discussion that would serve as a perfect introduction to Ginsberg.

We launched into "Howl" with a clip from *The Source* about the Six Gallery reading. The clip included an excerpt of Kerouac reading from his account of the event in *The Dharma Bums*, as well as commentary from Phil Whalen, Michael McClure, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg and at least one Beat historian. We also watched as John Turturro delivered his rendition of "Howl." Immediately after the clip, at least one member of the group said that she felt like she understood the poem better after hearing it aloud. From here we began discussing the poem as performance art and performance poetry in general. We shared our perceptions of poetry readings, and talked about the differences between reading a poem quietly and hearing it read aloud. Nicole reminded the group about the two Denver poets who read at *The Metro*. We touched on improvisational performance poetry as well as rehearsed performance poetry.

In relation to "Howl," we talked about Ginsberg's decision to arrange his lines as "breath units," and his explanation that his lines were longer than Whitman's because he could say more in one breath than Whitman could. Initially, this revelation seemed fascinating, but when we returned to *The Source* for a clip of Ginsberg reading from "Howl," it was clear that he was not reading each line as a single breath unit. Indeed, he was breathing before he reached the end of the line. Did he mean something else when he spoke of "breath units"? Was he just older and worn out by constant requests for him to read "Howl"? I recounted a story about one reading of "Howl" wherein Ginsberg quit reading just after the beginning of Part II. "I just can't read this anymore," he said.

Continuing with the structure of the poem, we also talked about parataxis and Ginsberg's use of the "eyeball kick" technique to involve the audience in the creation of the poem's art. I also mentioned that at least one reviewer linked the poem's paratactic elements with Dadaism, and thus labeled "Howl" as passé. Yet we were also able to see the necessity of parataxis in language poetry, a genre that could include "Howl" in its lineage. As an introduction to parataxis (and to language poetry, sort of), I mentioned the R.E.M song, "It's the End of the World as We Know It" and Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire." Then I read from language poet Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*:

Has the baby enough teeth for an apple. Juggle, jungle, chuckle. The hummingbird, for all we know, may be singing all day long. We had been in France where every word was a bird, a thing singing. I laugh as if my pots were clean. The apple in the pie is the pie. An extremely pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from conjunction, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader's mind to content in a writer's work. But not bitter.

I may have mentioned that language poetry is an acquired taste.

We went on to talk about the poem's influence on American culture, taking care to talk about just what American culture looked like in 1955. Clearly, some of the power of the poem has been diminished by the effects of the counterculture revolution (which almost certainly includes "Howl" in its lineage). So we imagined June Cleaver saying, "America, go fuck yourself with your atom bomb." I think that helped us to orient ourselves in terms of the poem's original strength. Then I mentioned that despite our cultural desensitization, organizers of a 50th anniversary radio broadcast of Ginsberg reading "Howl" saw fit to cancel the project in fear of FCC penalties. We brought up the obscenity trial and then we talked about the dichotomous influences of the poem. "It changed America," some say, and at the same time it reveals that America hasn't changed much.

As we talked about "Howl," several group members added to our discussion by reading their favorite passages aloud. We explored our own interpretations of those passages, and then talked about real people and events Ginsberg that refers to in the poem. We briefly discussed Carl Solomon and Neal Cassady ("cocksman and Adonis of Denver") and even Tuli Kupferberg ("who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten ...") Looking back, however, it seems as though Kupferberg has done his best to be remembered: in addition to his numerous publications (including *Teach Yourself Fucking*), and his work with a band called *The Fugs*, Kupferberg now has a YouTube channel called "Tulifuli."

We left "Howl" eventually and moved on to "Sunflower Sutra." I handed out copies of William Blake's poems, "Ah, Sunflower" and "A Sick Rose." We drew parallels in our discussion between the poems, trying to see if Blake influenced Ginsberg's poem (our consensus was inconclusive). But as we explored some of the larger meanings of "Sunflower Sutra," one group member

astutely pointed out that the sunflower is not the only flower in the poem. He read to us from the work,

"And you, Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me / not!"

A forget me not is also a kind of flower, he said. I wasn't clear on the flower's symbolism in 1955, but I recalled that the Forget Me Not is used now as a symbol by disabled veterans in America. We moved from there into speculation about the military-industrial establishment, thanks in part to our earlier interpretations of the poem, and to the locomotive's proximity to the Forget Me Not. Looking at the line now, I still don't know anything about the flower's symbolism in 1955, but if it's intended to refer to disabled vets and to the military-industrial establishment, then maybe there's something to Ginsberg's line break. He breaks the flower, much the same as disabled vets are broken.

We had so much to talk about that we weren't able to discuss all the poems in the book. We managed to explore "Transcription of Organ Music," "America," and fittingly, perhaps, (given the Whitman line that began our talk) "A Supermarket in California."

In "Supermarket" we saw two other homosexual poets in Lorca and Whitman and we wondered what Ginsberg was doing by placing them amongst the other commodities of the supermarket. We talked about the novelty of supermarkets in 1955, and what Ginsberg might see as the supermarkets' role in adding to the consumerist ills of the world. We talked about the ways in which supermarkets make us anonymous and perhaps even desensitize us and disconnect us. "Who killed the pork chops?"

I could go on and on – our discussion was that good – but I think I'm already over-doing it. We lingered well beyond nine o'clock, and I was sorry wrap things up. I don't think I was alone in feeling that way. One group member said she wished we could just continue meeting after the Beat readings ended.

We said goodnight and I went out to my Jeep. Sitting in the driver's seat, and leaning into the orange light thrown by a nearby lamp, I re-read a few lines from Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman":

And you, lovely Walt Whitman, stay asleep on the Hudson's banks

with your beard toward the pole, openhanded.

Soft clay or snow, your tongue calls for

comrades to keep watch over your unbodied gazelle.

Sleep on, nothing remains.

Dancing walls stir the prairies

and America drowns itself in machinery and lament.

I want the powerful air from the deepest night

to blow away flowers and inscriptions from the arch where  
you sleep,

and a black child to inform the gold-craving whites

that the kingdom of grain has arrived.

I cranked the engine and drove off into the darkness,  
silent all the way to the door of my cottage in the Western  
night.

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#### Lusk Howl Discussion

I think this one scared a lot of discussion members,  
because we only had five participants besides Debbie and  
myself. We started by listening to a recording of Ginsberg  
reading the first part of *Howl*. Our discussion focused at  
first on the form of the poem, noting particularly that the  
poem is meant to be read aloud. We noted that the poem  
is rhythmically structured around two elements: each line  
taking a full breath when spoken and the word "Who"  
repeated between each line. We each tried to read a line  
out loud to feel the effects of this rhythm, which in  
Ginsberg's own words is meant to be like a bop jazz  
phrase.

We next discussed the content of the poem. Like in  
Kerouac's *On the Road*, the poem's narrator seems to  
move effortlessly between expressing joy and despair at  
the same images, evoking the beat sensibility of  
celebrating the fringes of society in both its beauty and  
ugliness. Matt suggested that we can view the poem as a  
positive response to Whitman's joyful "yawp" that criss-  
crosses America like *On the Road*. We also talked about  
the poem's obscenity and agreed that by today's  
standards, its obscene passages are fairly innocuous.

One thing I suggested is that the seven of us each write  
our own short "howl" in response to Ginsberg and read  
them at our last discussion; hopefully, the group will abide  
and we'll have some interesting poems to hear.

## **Junky**

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We had eleven people come to our final discussion, a  
great improvement over our "Howl" evening. At the end of  
the "Howl" discussion, the four participants and I agreed to  
all write our own short howling poems, and we began the  
*Junky* discussion by sharing these poems with the group.  
We all agreed that Debbie Sturman's poem was the most  
authentic howl, though every poem was a delight to hear.

Our discussion of *Junky* began with the question "Why is  
this work categorized as 'beat' literature?" After much  
debate, we came to a consensus that *Junky* belongs in the  
beat oeuvre because Burroughs, like Kerouac in *On the  
Road*, and Ginsberg in "Howl," celebrates both the beauty  
and ugliness of the beat life of a junky who lives on the  
fringes of American society. Although the junky as  
Burroughs portrays him is "sick," he is never beat down by  
his addiction. In fact, although society sees him as a

criminal, Burrough's junky is not a criminal, but a survivor.  
The speaker in the novel is a sympathetic character,  
whose only real crime is shooting heroin and peddling it to  
support his habit. In fact, most of the junkies in the novel  
are moral, ethical people; only a few turn to petty crime to  
fund their addiction.

We also noted that this was also a road novel of sorts. Bu  
whereas Kerouac's road novel criss-crossed America from  
East to West, Burrough's *Junky* portrays a one way trip  
from North to South, the narrator ending up beyond the  
borders of the U.S. as a fugitive exile in Mexico planning a  
trip further south to Columbia. While Sal Paradise  
continues his search for the authentic life by looking west  
across the East River in the last chapter of *On the Road*,  
content to dream only of North America, Smith dreams of  
continuing his quest for the "uncut kick that opens out  
instead of narrowing down like junk" in South America.

We had a long discussion about the drug culture and how  
it has changed since the 1950's when *Junky* was  
published. Smith says that junk is a way of life, and we  
talked about the ways in which that way of life has gotten  
much more difficult since the war on drugs escalated in  
the 1970's and 80's. Some argued that drugs such as  
heroin should be legalized; others disagreed, arguing that,  
even though the war on drugs has been a costly failure,  
legalization is not the solution. One of our participants is in  
the medical field and told that many of the positive claims  
Burrough's makes about heroin use are simply false. We  
ended the evening with an informal discussion about the  
rampant prescription drug abuse in America, especially of  
powerful opiates such as oxycontin.

Thomas Deane Tucker, Ph.D.  
Lusk *Junky* Discussion