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**Subject: The Beat Generation**

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## **THE BEAT GENERATION**

*The Beat Generation, an American social and literary movement flourished during the 1950s and early 1960s, was of high influence on the cultural and literary fields of the American life. It appeared as a reaction to materialism of its time. Beat Generation was the efforts outcome of a group of poets and novelists called Beat Writers. They were generally associated with San Francisco for being the cradle in which the Beat Generation was given birth. Beat Writers were influenced by jazz music and Buddhism. Their lifestyle was marked by using drugs, drink, and free sex for the aim of intensifying experience and affirming their attitude against totalitarianism.*

### **The History of the Movement**

Many stories were circulated about who was the first to coin the phrase 'Beat Generation'. Regardless which of these stories was accurate, the meaning of the word 'Beat' is rarely discussed. It is said that the term Beat was devised by Jack Kerouac to bear "connotation of down-beat, off-beat, down-and-out, drop-out and beatitude, and denotes a group of American writers." Jack Kerouac devised the phrase "beat generation" in 1948 to describe his social circle and to characterize a perceived underground, anti-conformist youth movement in New York at that time. He was the acknowledged leader and spokesman of the Beat Generation and most people regard him as the king of the Beats. The term came up in conversation with the novelist John Clellon Holmes, one of the first group members of the Beat poets. It is said that Holmes who pressed Kerouac to describe the group using the term "Beat

Generation” to mean downbeat, beatific and beautiful as well. In the 40s, there was some confusion, some growing awareness of 'beat' or furtive terms that described the times. 'Beat' originally had several meanings; it means 'tired' or beaten down in the sense that it refers to the spiritual exhaustion and feelings of rebellion against materialism of postwar America. Jazz musician used it to describe being 'dead beat' or 'beat up'. Also 'beat' meant exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, perceptive, and rejected by society. The term 'beat' might refer to a musical model or it might refer to a state of being tired or worn out in the sense that they knew nothing else but what was supposed to do to accommodate war.

Although the word 'Beat' was introduced first by Kerouac, this term existed long time before his use. It had been used in African-American jazz circles for years to mean exhausted or broke. But for Kerouac, Holmes and Ginsberg, been come to mean a combination between exhaustion and empowerment. Never in the history of literature and literary movements had so much been owed to so few three men: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs became the core of a literary and social phenomenon that transformed American society.

Kerouac and Ginsberg, along with Burroughs and Holms formed friendships in New York City in the mid-1940s. They were introduced through a series of mutual friends, liked one another they began to hang out together then formed the nucleus of the Beat Generation. As a result, a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, group of people who broke the mold and changed writing forever grew around them. This group scoured Time Square in New York, looking for new experience. They sought out drugs, girls, booze, crazy people, and crazy situations.

After the Second World War, America has witnessed many and great changes in its society because of the use of new technology in one hand and the threat of nuclear weapons on the other hand. All of these factors gathered to create a sort of unrest and weariness because they thought that mankind would be destroyed by the power of science and that is what caused the emergence of the Beat Generation as an attempt to change the fate of their society. It means that Beat Generation was not a questioning society, authority and its rules just for the sake of it, people were crying out for something new at that time, there was a new sense of freedom after the war, and the Beat Generation led the way in exploring it.

The Beat Generation was really a response to the Second World War that had just ended. Questions arose about the old way of life and social rules that people were supposed to adhere to. The Beats were few in number, tied together by time more than space; discover a new way of writing style and content for the aim of being against mainstream, traditional writing, but not because they were rebellious. A new way of writing was developed and that is what created a new vision that made the Beat phenomenon unique in the way it has remained so popular with each successive generation of young rebels.

The original beats emerged in the 40's and were a small group of friends, initially; this group began to fade out. After the war, the Beat Generation took on a more distinct meaning as these beats, began defining themselves, and publishing their writings. They met each other in New York. Although they were later considered anti-academic artist, the seeds of the Beat Generation was planted in a highly academic environment, Columbia University, and it is quite correct to say that many of their early ideas were

formed during arguments with professors there. While at Columbia, Ginsberg met friend and mentor Jack Kerouac whom he would later join to form the school of Disembodied poets. Growing through the fifties and into the sixties, the original group was quite small, including some friends, but as their influence grew throughout the country, the Beat Writers became intellectually and poetically connected to the San Francisco Renaissance.

### **Why and how the Beats came to be?**

As a matter of fact, no discussion of the Beats will be satisfactory without looking at the environment of their times. A certain question may be asked firstly, what happened in America during the 1950s to create a situation in which a small group of artists go beyond to reach large numbers of young Americans and create a phenomenon that settled new ways of looking at the world? After the Second World War, American society was changed drastically, many things were changed and many different factors played into the culture that gave birth to the Beats. America of the mid 1940s was a place of rapid political and cultural transition: the Great Depression of the 1930s, which had shaped the childhoods of most of the Beat Writers, had been placed by American involvement in the Second World War, and the Cold War with Soviet Union in 1947.

Dick McBride, a writer and contemporary of Allen Ginsberg, commented on the period of the emergence of the Beats saying:

“there were a lot of zombies then, early fifties, Korean War over just about and we hadn’t even felt the last shock waves of World War II... The bomb bothered us a lot then, Hiroshima and Nagasaki there didn’t seem too much to live for.”

The period of the 1950s was of materialism and conformity in the United States. It had witnessed an exuberance of material goods such as cars and other household items that were very little during the Great Depression and the Second World War. Even the middle class and the suburban families could have anything in reasonable prices. So, this led to a sense of conformity that was everywhere in America from cars to clothes, from social behavior to politics. American citizen purpose was to work hard, raise a family and to be patriotic to his country. It was a society of rules, orders, and materialism. There was little if any room for individualistic behavior. This atmosphere and the Cold War against Soviet Union created a sense of protest inside a group of writers who did not hesitate to declare their alienation toward conformity through their poetry and lifestyle. This group represented the Beat Generation.

Beat members were dissatisfied about New American society and about the new lifestyle of America so, and that is what led them to create new values and change all the cultural attitudes. The 1960s was the decade of deep changes. Young people began to stand against materialism and cultural and political norms. They were looking for alternatives in their lifestyles in the time by which American faced many boggling issues just like civil rights, drug use, sexual freedom and non-conformity.

Many of incidents had gathered to construct the history of the Beat Generation; the first one is the meeting between Kerouac and Ginsberg at Columbia University in 1944 making small group later by William Burroughs, merging together with Lucien Carr, Hal Chase, Edie Parker, and Joan Vollmer. The second incident could be the joining of Neal Cassady to this group and his influence on Kerouac and Ginsberg. The most important thing to be mentioned was the performance of *Howl* for the first time at the

Six Gallery in San Francisco in October 1955 and also other members read their poems like Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia and Philip Whalen. The reading of the Six Gallery is often seen as milestone for the Beats. It can be considered as the starting point of the Beat Generation. Kerouac himself said that it is the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. The leading figures of the Beat Generation became nationally and internationally known after the success of the Six Gallery.

The first group of San Francisco Beat poets is associated with a specific time frame and a particular state of mind. Their poetry was distinguished from other experimented poetry of that time in the sense that it had written in free-verse form and it was frequently accompanied with jazz. The Beat poets wanted to put the idealism of the American dream of individual freedom to its final test. They were known for their disobedience against social conformity, political repression, and common materialism by experiencing unconventional style in expressing their sexual and spiritual values.

### **At Columbia University**

During the 1940s, as mentioned previously, the US was involved in World War II, and thereafter, in the Cold War. In that period, a small group of friends met at Columbia University and its neighborhood. This meeting was of high significance for the reason that it represented the birth of what is called the Beat Generation to be developed later to become one of the largest movement of the century.

The members of this small group of men are called founders of the Beat Generation. The central figures of Columbia University meeting were: Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, they formed the core of the initial group, and

they became bulwark of the group for the coming years. The other original members like Neal Cassady, John Clellon Holmes and Lucien Carr, were of less influence than the others in spite of that they were considered within the main group. Gregory Corso was a poet from the first wave of the Beats whom Ginsberg met in a bar.

Although they were later considered as anti-academic artists, The Beats were all well-educated and generally from middle class background and the seeds for the Beat Generation were planted in a highly academic environment. It can be said that the “New Vision” of Beat writers was discussed with the professors there according to their new ideas and thoughts.

Columbia was the birthplace of the Beat Generation and the place at which the combination of the West Coast and East Coast movement was existed. The literary voice of the Beat Generation on the East Coast was formed under the leadership of Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac while the West Coast movement was originally led by Gary Cnyder, Philip Wallen and others.

At that place, Allen Ginsberg arrived to begin his freshman year when he was of 17 and a young man named Jack Kerouac in his 22 enrolled there on a football scholarship. They were introduced to each other by their mutual friend Lucien Carr in 1944; they liked each other and became friends later. They were drawn to literature and began using drugs in order to inspire them to create what they called a “New Vision” of art. A brief duration, Carr, introduced them to William S. Burroughs and Hal Chase, the latter, shared his room with Ginsberg and was a close friend of Kerouac. In 1946, Chase received a visit from his hometown friend Neal Cassady, the event that begins the book *On The Road*.



William S. Burroughs proved himself as another original Beat writer; he was elder and more experienced than his contemporaries. It was a pure incident that he, Kerouac and Ginsberg entered each other's circle, for their creative interchanges marked the beginning of the Beat literature.

Allen Ginsberg was recognized as a promising young talent by some English Professors like Mark Van Doren and Lionel Trilling, but was punished and suspended for a year for two reasons: first for writing obscenity on a dirty bedroom window about the President of Columbia University, and second for allowing Jack Kerouac to sleep in his room. Ginsberg continued at Columbia after this, and he stayed in touch with Mark Van Doren.

At the same time when Ginsberg and Kerouac were friends at Columbia, Lawrence Ferlinghetti was a graduate student but he didn't meet them.

It has to be said that Columbia was the site of some student protests in the 1960s. Columbia University and Times Square in New York City was the main place of the Beats in which they formed the nucleus of the movement. Although it was spread to the West Coast to become the San Francisco Renaissance, it had started in the streets of New York.

### **Six Poets at Six Gallery**

"Six poets at six Gallery" offer a remarkable collection of angels on one stage reading their poetry" and promising "sharp new straightforward writing." It was an attractive flyers slogan circulated through the North Beach area in San Francisco on October 7<sup>th</sup>. About a hundred of postcards of the "charming event" with this slogan were distributed in the cafes and bars without admission charge only a "small collection for wine". It was Allen Ginsberg

who organized everything related to this event. Moreover, his small cottage on Milvia Street in Berkeley, where he lived with Kerouac, was the headquarters for the event. That night people were crowded at Six Gallery, it is said that they were more than a hundred and fifty, waiting for the opening of the “charming event”.

Kenneth Rexroth was selected by Allen Ginsberg to be the master of ceremonies of the event. He is considered as the founding father of San Francisco Renaissance, belonged to an older generation but he was the perfect one. He welcomed the audience and introduced the poets one after the other, the first poet was Philip Lamantia, then Michael McClure, then Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder.

Ginsberg’s preparation for that event began one week before and he was so confused to read the “first Scraps” of a long poem on the stage for the first time and in front of un-known audience. Kerouac supported Ginsberg and that is why he was able to recover his self-confidence and to be outstanding.

When Ginsberg came to the stage, the audiences were silent because they have heard previously about this poem as a poetic masterpiece. So, they were straining to hear every word. He began reading with a tensed voice but gradually, with the audience encouragement, his voice became increasingly sober and strong. This developed inside him a sense of identity more than he had ever had before. He was supported by his close friend Jack Kerouac, who beats a rhythm on a jug of wine between verses, and emphasized the end of each line with a shouted “go”. The poem began with powerful lines that had attracted the audience attention:” I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/dragging themselves through the negro streets at down looking for an angry fix.”

Since the poem's composition, political interpretations have reverted in a wide range of social issues; its success makes Ginsberg the unique figure among American poets of his time. It has powerful aspects that differentiate it from any of other poems of the Beat Generation. When he finished his performance, his face filled with tears. He was looking at the audience, many of them were crying with him, they recognized that it is a change point in the world around them, and it is really a new literary phenomenon. Ginsberg was the hero of the Six Gallery event and *Howl* was the climax. *Howl* would make him famous all over San Francisco. People began to congratulate him for his success and Kerouac was the first one among them.

The Six Gallery reading was the starting point of the Beat Generation. The evening of their reading became a historical moment in twentieth century American poetry. "This reading signaled the full emergence of the San Francisco Renaissance into the public consciousness and helped establish the city's reputation as a center for counterculture activity that came to full flower during the hippie years of the 1960s." It was an impassioned reading that is considered as a momentous occasion in American literature. The night can be seen as the moment that initiated the Beat Generation's transformation from a small underground network of writers to an internationally recognizable generation that made its leading figures become nationally and internationally known. The event was unique in everything; in the audience numbers and members, and in performers on the stage. "The Literary Revolution in America" an essay written by Ginsberg and Gregory Corso they said: "this was no ordinary poetry reading."

Michael McClure a beat poet who was at the Six Gallery poetry Reading, described this evening saying:

150 people in the audience that night cheered on Allen Ginsberg as he came to Howl's conclusion. Everyone knew that a human barrier had and been broken, and that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases.

The young poets of the Six Gallery shared the same sense against militarism, materialism and conformity of the new American civilization. They all were willing to take personal risks for poetic and political experiences.

The efforts of Allen Ginsberg and his friends were not in vain. They were able to establish the Beat Generation as a movement of great influence on the culture and the literature of their society during the 1950s and early 1960s. Beat Generation proved itself as one of the largest movements of the twentieth century. As a response to the Second World War, it started as a literary phenomenon to be developed quickly into attitudes of changing American people life all over the country by using literary expressions. The works of the main members of this movement stood for a discussion that suggested the new vision of their new society they were trying to achieve. As much as they were aware of their society corruption, they were able to separate themselves from it to enjoy the beauty of individuality and creativity.

It is noted that women had no role in developing this movement and that is what comes as a reflection of the sexism of the period during which the Beat Generation was flourished. The Beat Writers were all men who used their writings to focus on spiritual longing depending on concepts and imagery borrowed from Buddhism, Judaism, and Catholicism.

