

THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE

EXTENDED ESSAY

Research Question: In what ways are the distinct topics of the Beat Generation represented Jack Kerouac's "On The Road" and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"?

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ABSTRACT

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) are intricate, sophisticated, and philosophical works that provoke many questions about the American society in the 1950s. Ginsberg's lyrical and Kerouac's imaginative style engage the reader in the exploration of the 50s concepts. This essay focuses on what those concepts and topics are and how they are depicted, with close connections between the literary techniques used by both writers. The essay also centers on the lives of both authors, since it is vital to understand their personal lives and world vision to thoroughly understand both literary works.

The scope of this essay is limited with *On the Road* and *Howl*. However, it also considers secondary materials that supplement our understanding of the work including references to other Beat Movement authors and sections from both authors' interviews and others literary works when suitable. It involves the exploration of the research question in terms of politics and social life, with reference to Kerouac and Ginsberg's stand on the explored topics. The essay concludes that although criticism regarding the Beat Generation's literary stand and ideology came from almost all parts of American society, Beat movement is significant in the modernization of the old institutions. *Howl* and *On the Road* simply define the basis of the Beat Generation, and the imminent movements to come. The essay examines four topics of the Beat Movement: Grotesque and Drug Use, Appreciation of Idiosyncrasy, Freedom and Confinement, and Visions of America/The American Dream. It also analyzes the literary techniques employed by Kerouac and Ginsberg to delineate the abovementioned themes to provide a holistic view to the literary works and the movement itself.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE BEATS AND BEAT GENERATION

In the 50s United States, a fresh cultural, developmental, edifying, artistic and literary movement made its mark on the country's consciousness and everyday life. The Beat Movement was never considered to be a grand movement in terms of sheer numbers; however, in impact and significance on the American way of living, the Beats were more discernable than any other competing literary movement and had a tremendous impact on the American culture. The years shortly after World War II saw an extensive, large-scale reevaluation of the traditional structures and norms of the American society. During the time when post-World War II monetary repercussions were established, college students were starting to question the prevalent utilitarianism of the American society. The movement was a product of this inquisition and linear subject-based inquiry. Beats believed that uncontrolled capitalism was damaging to the human resolve and contradictory to civil egalitarianism. Further to their discontent with consumer culture and strong opposition to materialism and a money-centered society, the Beats strongly opposed the oppressive prudery and constraint of the preceding generation. Taboos restricting open discussions of sexuality were seen as restrictive and potentially destructive to the spirit. In a world regarding esthetics highly, Beat writers stood strongly against the immaculate and even sterile formality of the contemporary Modernists, most significantly and openly to C.S Elliot and his commitment to Neoclassic approach to literature. They formed a genre that was more daring and outspoken than any preceding literary movement. Underground music, Jazz in particular, was notably reminiscent for the Beats. However, to some, the literary works of the Beats were guilty of obscenity, maybe even pornography; thus, deserved censorship, and in

extreme cases, a full ban and isolation. Some dismissed Beat literature as sheer insult – an easy way to draw attention, not a form of art, nor medium of spreading ideas. Nonetheless, time and the shifting world has proven that the cultural significance Beat Generation literary figures was far from fleeting, since the influence of their work and ideology continues to be boundless.

Pioneers of the Beat Generation Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, who formed and remained the bastion of the Beat ideology in the coming years, met at Columbia University as undergraduate students in 1941. In spite of their anti-institution facade, the Beats, as we see from Kerouac and Ginsberg, were all well-educated and cultured; many even went to Ivy League schools such as William S. Burroughs, Robert Duncan, and William Carlos Williams and, in fact, usually came from upper-middle class upbringing. It was absolute happenstance that Ginsberg and Kerouac would get in each other's path for their innovative, visionary exchange marked the genesis of Beat Generation that revolutionized American literature and society notably.

No single Beat writer gained more fame and commendation than Kerouac, and similarly none of them had to go through struggle, turmoil, loss, deterioration, disorientation and crippling downheartedness as much as Kerouac. Ultimately dying from alcohol and substance abuse, Jack Kerouac, a known introvert, at no time was contended with the responsibility he obtained as the de facto representative of the Beat Generation. His greatest success was *On the Road*, a philosophical, even abstract, expedition narrative that synthesizes drug perceptions, stream of consciousness, and observations into a declaration relating to a generation that still resonates entirely. His Beat movement comrades were even also surprised with the artistry and intensity

that arose from the shy, even time to time unwilling, Jack Kerouac. Inside the novel, one may find an immense potential often impeded by disorder, and a devouring idealism that was crashed by the bitter reality of the American marketplace and mass-mediated culture. Jack Kerouac was the less resilient, if not weakest, among all Beat penmen and eventually succumbed to the pressure of stardom and acclaim. Whilst Allen Ginsberg averted the burdens of responsibility, Kerouac carried the responsibility of his position firmly on his back, but the weight ultimately brought his end. The differences in personalities between Kerouac and Ginsberg also emerged in their literary approaches as well; making Ginsberg more flamboyant abstract, and Kerouac more concerned with the unspeakable visions of the individual and telling the genuine and untold story of the world and its realities in interior monologue.

I) GROTESQUE, DRUG USE, AND SEXUALITY

"Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk." Kerouac¹

The printing of *Howl* in 1956 brought a critical shift in the timeline of not only Beat literature, but also American (and even world) literature and society itself. *Howl* is planned to be read out loud, maybe even intoned- a turn back to an oral custom that had been ignored in the world of artistic productions for so a long period of time, which is also suggested in concordance with the poem's title as well. The content and context of the poem raised eyebrows from all parts of society, and kindled an obscenity trial that questioned the description of pornography in The United States. Allen Ginsberg survived the trial, and the outcomes of this judgment period more or less safeguarded literary liberation and ensured that poetry and narrative would from then on be unaffected, if not fully resistant, to the kind of censorship that still plagued other forms of art all around the world. As seen in *Howl*, in Ginsberg's America, there are substance abusers, hobos, itinerants, street women, hustlers, and con artists. There is an intuitive animosity against the system that requires submission and conformity. Profanity and slang language are common all through this lengthy poem, in addition to illicit drug use and lawlessness. The radical shift in literature and esthetics were appalling to the 1950s institutions. Prior literary works censored drug use, in fact, the word "drug" itself was taboo in general and used code words that would suggest the meaning (i.e. Mary Jane would stand for Marijuana).

¹Kerouac, pg.36

Directly using the word “drug” is indeed a bold movement by Ginsberg, not to mention his straightforwardness and opposition to censorship and various taboos would open a new chapter in American literature and future American social and youth movements, most significantly the Hippie and Counterculture movements of the mid-60s and the San Francisco Renaissance.

Kerouac’s *On the Road* was as revolutionary as Ginsberg’s *Howl* in the means of demolishing society’s opposition to drug use and taboos, in general. Mainstream Americans were shocked by Beats alleged sexual abnormality and substance use. When it was published, *On the Road* received widely varied reviews with some critics praising the Kerouac’s bold style initiating investigation of American society and values. Others; however, derided Kerouac’s effort as an absurd series of short stories filled with narrow-minded criminals and drug addicts. Nonetheless, *On the Road* became the holy book of the “Beat Generation”, a term Kerouac had coined but he later regretted this name when the press and public almost solely focused on the “Beat” image and lifestyle, but generally overlooked the mystic, almost enigmatic or even magical, poetic element of Kerouac’s and other Beat Generation writers’ work. That being said, one may find *On the Road* indeed mystical and abstract. Dreams in *On the Road* are recurrently spiritual, featuring God in bizarre, offbeat forms and often alluding to the Bible seen in the reference to a snake. In the novel, hallucinations are not only the result of substance abuse or physical or mental extremity, but are somehow ironically present in sobriety as well. Characters are mainly concerned with the means (if any) to understand their visions obtained from severe hallucinations in order to use them in daily life and to learn from them, allowing such elements to serve as means to deliver interpretations on various cerebral concepts.

II) APPRECIATION OF IDIOSYNCRASY

One significant impact the Beat Generation had on the American society is that it extended the pillar of the society, circumscribing groups that were usually excluded. *“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked”*¹ Ginsberg puts it, dignifying individuality and original thought. Through *Howl*, Ginsberg communicates the idea that different is not necessarily erratic. In addition, the speaker of *Howl* alludes to many religions that range from Judaism (Kabbalah) to Islam to Christianity. Not to mention many lines in the poem would be considered heresy by Orthodox or Semitic religions most significantly seen when the speaker suggests that the society does not need a “supernatural” Jesus. Nonetheless, there's also an extremely strong case to be made for the idea that Ginsberg was, in fact, a religious/spiritual poet. Although Ginsberg was not even slightly interested in succumbing to the rules and dogmas set down by tradition, he wanted communion with God or a higher omnipotent spirit.

No single collective movement confronted the rules that defined the social order in late-1950s as much as the Beats. Allen Ginsberg indeed wasn't an agitator, but he firmly held the thought that the severity of the judiciary, educational, and health systems jeopardized the resourcefulness and imaginativeness of America's most gifted, talented individuals.

Ginsberg also reiterates and slightly alters his statement on the “best mind of a generation” stating *“I suppose it could apply to me too, or anybody. People who survived and became prosperous in a basically aggressive, warlike society are in a sense destroyed by madness. Those who freaked out and couldn't make it, or were traumatized, or artists who starved, or whatnot, they couldn't make it either.”*²

¹: Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl, and other poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop.

²: Ginsberg Interview. (1990). Retrieved January 10, 2015, from <http://jig.joelpomerantz.com/otherwriters/ginsberg>

In *On the Road*, the theme of “Appreciation of Idiosyncrasy” is explored interconnected with another theme also seen in *Howl*, madness. While he himself cannot achieve the madness of his hero, Sal is fascinated and follows Dean around because of it. While madness initially enables Sal and Dean’s friendship because it allows them to understand each another other on a personal level of madness, this turns into an obstacle between them that drifts Sal and Dean apart. To Sal, Dean is both the “Angel” and the “Devil”, a “Soul of Beat” but also “An Angel of Terror”. Religious elements to madness can also be seen (affiliated to a spiritual devoutness) not to mention the linkage of madness with use of illicit substance, consumption of alcoholic beverages, and underground music- jazz in particular. Sal famously comments that the only people for him are the mad ones, indicating a clear appreciation of the different or even marginal:

*“The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!””*³

³: Kerouac, pg.5

III) FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT

On surface, Kerouac's *On the Road* celebrates self-independence and breaking free from restrictions. Through the narrator point of view, Kerouac discovers the theme freedom and confinement on a personal level. The story is seen through the eyes of Sal Paradise, who is thought to mirror Jack Kerouac. This may be interpreted as Kerouac, a shy, introverted person himself, delivering his ideas and illustrating his life through a fictional channel. Although Sal is symbolically more important Dean Moriarty draws more attention than him because Sal is obsessed with Dean to an unhealthy extent and focuses on his obsession with him often. Nonetheless, Sal remains the central persona of the plot- the readers see through his thoughts and witness his development, usually without the presence of Dean. The colloquial language employed throughout the novel lets the audience almost hear the novel, as if *On the Road* is a story told by some ordinary truck driver to the random hitchhiker he picked up; however, the hitchhiker is more figurative than it appears at first sight. The hitchhiker is an analogy here; the reader is the hitchhiker. Not only does this analogy provide a bit of insight into the characters, but also allows a shift between freedom and confinement and draw attention to the thin line between the concepts that the reader might otherwise miss.

Like Kerouac's *On the Road*, *Howl* also celebrates personal freedom. Excursion is one means of earning self-independence, and the characters in *Howl* do just as much cross-country road-tripping as *On the Road*'s *Dean Moriarty* and *Sal Paradise*. In order to highlight the necessity of personal freedom Ginsberg uses a foil- the theme of confinement- as seen in the second and third sections of *Howl*. Moloch is the god of prisons, governments, and mundane suburbia while

Rockland represents the mental and physical confinement of the mental institutions. "*Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland where you're madder than I am*"¹, he puts it, to underscore the degree of severity of confinement in mental institutions particularly. Written while Allen Ginsberg was under the influence of substance, Part Two of *Howl* seeks to name the roots of mankind's agony and dissatisfaction. Through Moloch, a Barbarian false deity to whom toddlers are immolated by the despotic, Ginsberg personifies the reasons of social ills: government bureaucracy, oppression, runoff capitalism, submission, utilitarianism, materialism, technology, and lack of justice. Moloch, an evil "judge of mankind," demolishes the very best of human nature, kindling lack of self-confidence which turns into apprehension and self-doubt to those rejected to follow Moloch's ways.

Part Three of the poem balances the demolition and depression of the first two parts- which is thought to be a form of personal tribute to Carl Solomon, Ginsberg's close friend, with whom Ginsberg first met when he was being treated mentally at a psychiatric institution in New York which lasted several months. Maintaining his standpoint on non-assailant protest against the aspects of American society that he holds responsible for paralyzing the dynamism of a generation, Ginsberg nevertheless demonstrates in this part an underlying lust for reconciliation with America: "*we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep.*"²

¹: Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl, and other poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop.

²: Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl, and other poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop.

He; however, later on changes his stance on America in his other poems, most notably, *America*- also printed in the original edition of *Howl, and other poems*. “*America I've given you all and now I'm nothing,*”³ the speaker of *America* puts, which illustrates that Ginsberg holds grudges to the country of his birth and citizenship. Part three of *Howl* can be considered a grudging acknowledgment of the fact that while certain agonizing facets of society will not be effortlessly eradicated or even amended, collective and individual fight is still worthy and heroic. Overall, due to the movement’s collective nature, the poem itself is also very inclusive, embracing all parts of the society that range from supporters of “Mohammedian angels” to African Americans and Jewish people. *Howl* also discredits both extreme ends of the society, Capitalism, and *Supercommunism* that illustrates the movement’s strict opposition to materialism. In essence, peace and brotherhood are freedom, and materialism is confinement.

Pursuit was a prominent concept of the Beat Generation. For Beat writers and particularly Jack Kerouac, meaning is not a target or destination, but is rather embedded in the act of pursuit. That being said, it is definitely not a coincidence that Jack Kerouac sets his fiction on a both literal and metaphorical road trip to illustrate the basis of the Beat ideology, not to mention titles his work *On the Road*. *Howl* also echoes the same urge to pursuit, in a more subtle manner nonetheless. Just like the novel, the poem also reaches to all corners of continental United States; from *Harlem* to *Atlantic City*, from *New Jersey* to *Denver*, from *Washington D.C* to *North Carolina*.

³: Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl, and other poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop.

IV) VISIONS OF AMERICA/THE AMERICAN DREAM

“Behind us lay the whole of America and everything Dean and I had previously known about life, and life on the road. We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we never dreamed the extent of the magic. –Kerouac”¹

With Ginsberg’s *Howl* and Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the notion of acceptable literature widened immensely, setting forth a new American outlook. Censorship as an external force for inflecting public’s opinion, at least in the domain of arts, esthetics, and literature was terminated. In addition to their influence in literature, the Beats also propelled discussions of ecology and environmentalism into daily life, thus broadening mainstream American vision regarding worldly issues. Nature was an escape for them and a source of individualism, as shown in *On the Road* “*What is that feeling when you drive away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? We lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies*”². Prior to the Beat Generation, environmentalism did not really exist, or at least did not beget a major pro-green influence. The Beat writers’ (Ginsberg in particular and his infatuation with Buddhism) fascination with Native American as well as far-Eastern philosophies contributed to the true inception of modern environmental ethics and the pro-green movement to follow, at least as a side product.

¹: Kerouac, pg. 173

²: Kerouac, pg.99

This also marked the genesis of a less structurally concerned poetry. Under Beat influence, poetry went through a liberation of structure and style that in essence allowed people from all corners of the society to express themselves in any literary fashion of choice, so the suffocating formalism of the Modernists was thoroughly subverted.

The following movements in the 1960s and onward, most significantly the hippie movement, owed a considerable debt to the Beat Generation, especially in the means of providing an ideological basis, though Beats were reluctant to own the claim the counterculture hippies were influenced by them. Unlike Beats, the hippies usually lacked the scholarly backing which made the Beat movement a valuable one. They believed that if one wants to change a system (or influence the society), one must have at least a slight notion on the inner workings of the system, which significantly added to their direct contributions to the American dream. Unlike other contemporary movements, they did not try to subvert the establishment but rather reinterpret it. Their esthetic revolt was indeed deliberately planned, and synthesized with preceding ideas with an anticipation of what may come afterward also.

Kerouac's *On the Road* is the itinerant excursion of two sophisticated and spirited men, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, pursuing liberation in an attempt to push the "American Dream" to its greatest possible extent. Indirectly based on the travels of Jack Kerouac around continental United States, *On the Road* demonstrates Kerouac's achievements, conflicts, and evolution as he travels along the prominent Route-66 with his fellow companions, most noticeably, Neal Cassady.

From the rocky and fierce wasteland to the confining and merciless metropolis, all pieces of land are bonded to a singular, greater entity. After Sal first travels to the Bay Area and visits San Francisco, the shy, reserved main character is enthralled by the region's landscapes and describes them with precise, intricate detail; nonetheless, as time flows, his perception of America changes during his travels. His earliest observations of America dwindle from a grand and euphoric world of wonder to a much more contemplative, philosophical, somewhat metaphysical form of thought. For instance, Sal, instead of describing the elaborate details of Mississippi hills, starts to look at the "bigger picture" in front of him. Sal starts to ask philosophical questions in the form of "what is", or "what are" when contemplating the meaning of life. These interrogations are more perplexed, even oversimplified; however, this questioning foreshadows the "spiritual awakening" he encounters during his last journey to the Bay Area.

In a sense, *On the Road* is an American's journey westward, which has been a recurring theme throughout the course of American history. From Lewis and Clark's epic journey, to the pioneers in search of salvation and success, to the westward movement of the Great Depression, Sal and Dean are characters who have followed in their ancestors' footsteps. Unlike their predecessors, they were not searching for an ultimate destination, nor were they willing to settle down to a singular place. Sal and Dean's vision regarding the future of America was different yet clairvoyant; they were not seeking a goal but rather cherishing the freedom of movement, and this reinterpretation of the American Dream was avant-garde for its time and radical for its contemporaries. Even Gary Snyder, who disliked being associated with the Beat Generation, stated "*beat can also be defined as a particular state of mind ... and I was in that mind for a while*"³.

³: The Columbia History of American Poetry (1993) by Jay Parini and Brett Candlish Millier ISBN 0-231-07836-6

Through *Howl*, Ginsberg also pursues a similar objective. *Howl* proclaims counter-culture movement and derides attempts in social acceptance. The poem's heading *Howl* reveals the protest to be a cry, a cry for all forms of corruption, abuse, mistreatment, oppression, and enslavement. The speaker of the poem invites people to cry against capitalism, commercialism, exploitation, suppression and servitude. The "best minds" of the 1950s suffered from hysteria when their dreams were postponed continuously. Their aspirations in life were destroyed by madness that came in different forms, and this madness brought with itself a counterculture that is not their choice, but rather their drive that keeps them standing. Ginsberg's poem introduces an image of a dystopian society and the wilderness of its time period. The movement of *Howl* is from turmoil, outcry, objection, agony, affirmation, and perception- from rupture to rapport. The speaker of *Howl* condescends to an underworld full of gloom, adversity, and desolation and then escalates to divine knowledge, beatitude, gained acute perception, and a unison with society and a higher spirit. *Howl* and movement advance by repeating duality of sleeping and waking, darkness and brightness, death and rebirth. In *Howl* the speaker/persona describes the desperation of a group of social outcast, including himself as well, who is searching for sublime reality.

The social outcasts become bare-naked so as to challenge the mainstream culture. They go to the Negro street and look with frustration; this frustration is a form of expression of indictment against American culture. Society birthed them but distorted them as well.

CONCLUSION

Derision of the Beats' esthetics and motivation rose from all parts of the society. The intellectuals disparaged them for being coarse and uncivilized. Politicians such as Joseph McCarthy held the idea that topics celebrated in Beat Literature were a threat because, for him, such elements were Communist and therefore a jeopardized America's welfare. Despite criticisms, they never disintegrated; in fact, they instead stood strong against scorns in unity-but still, Beats' somewhat brief existence under the spotlight of American literature could most definitely be associated to the amount of derision gathered upon them. The original coinage of the term *Beat* in the early 1950s, by Jack Kerouac, meant to indicate being beaten down and even stepped over, and given mainstream America's conditions that explanation was indeed very suitable.

All in all, *On the Road* is an enthralling novel that takes its audience on a mystical excursion to a time frame when the American society was at its dawn of submission. *On the Road* is a flagship novel that defined the "Beat Generation" and helped influence other political, social and literary movements to come. *Howl*, a more marginal literary work, also is significant in establishing the ground rules of the movement and setting the basis of the generation's peace-centered ideology. Both are successful in illustrating the era's social dynamics, by underscoring four highly significant themes explored: Grotesque, Drug use and Sexuality, Appreciation of Idiosyncrasy, Freedom and Confinement and Visions of America/The American Dream. Both literary works serve as scriptures of the Beat Generation, due to their large impact on the American society. In essence, both *Howl* and *On the Road* were successful in bringing a new breath into old institutions, and influencing their generation's way of living.

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