

william burroughs & Jack kerouac:the beat generation

Throughout the twentieth century, we have been witness to several movements which have helped to shape the face of American culture. Collectively these movements have modified the way we, as Americans, think and behave. One of the most influential literary movements of this century has been that of the Beat movement. By using various literary techniques, along with non-conformist lifestyles as a basis for their writing, the beats were able to stir things up and shock society. They stormed and looted the impenetrable stronghold of serious literature. The beat generation opened up the eyes of the world to the unconventional, and by doing so, made its mark as the most significant literary movement of this century.

The beats were a small group of writers and intellectuals who were opposed to a totalitarian America. An American society which was based on mass consumption and mass conformity, leaving very little room for individualism. The beats, of which Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs are best known today, rebelled against American culture through their literary works. These works were often based on the beats' own experiences, which came to increasingly include drugs, sex, and Jazz.

Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs became acquainted with each other in the vicinity of Columbia University in the mid-1940's. They remained friends while motivating each others individualistic writing efforts, however, it was more than ten years after that, in the 1950's before publishers began to take their work seriously. Jack Kerouac coined the term "beat" during a conversation with Herbert Hunke. Beat was originally used to describe Kerouac's close network of friends, consisting mainly of artists, writers, and criminals, only later did it represent an entire movement. Kerouac felt the word beat represented the notion that he, along with his friends, were beaten down by the government, beaten down by the police, beaten down by any and all controlling institutions, and for a while, beaten down from the literary world. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs all sustained the desire to keep the beat, to celebrate the true spirit of the lower class, which to them, happens to be the real beat generation.

The beats wrote literature and poetry, it was here where they began to experiment with new writing styles, and new ways of living life. These new experiment methods pressed the notion of freedom to a new limit while, breaking societies hold on what freedom is suppose to mean. The beats engaged in escapades that included crime, hedonistic parties, and mind altering drugs. It was the perfect combination of non-conformist desires to live life to its fullest, along with brilliance in writing, that made the writers of the beat generation eye-catching to the public. Everywhere they went they rejoiced in the splendor of life: nature, writing, art, and experience.

The two artists who are the focus for this paper are Jack Kerouac, and William S Burroughs. Although the two were prominent and defining members of the beat movement, they oddly enough did not have much in common. Their writing techniques are contrary, as well as their lifestyles. Kerouac's writing is a direct consummation of his immutable personal loneliness. It was during his life experiences, whether it was binge drinking, wild sex, or lunacy on the road, where he attempted to quench his desire to find himself, and in the process hoped to eradicate his personal loneliness. On the other hand, Burroughs' writing is a unique interpretation of altered states of consciousness due to his heavy involvement in mind altering drugs, such as heroin. It was through these visions and experiences where he wrote his most creative and peculiar work.

Jack Kerouac described America. We are able to experience brilliant sunsets through his eyes, and we are almost able to taste the potent Jack Daniel's he loosely swallowed down. His collection of writings make up his life experience growing up, working, and traveling through America. Jack Kerouac lead an almost tragic life. He was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, to a French Canadian family. As an adolescent he found himself unchallenged by those around him, they bored him. As a result he

spent his time making trips to New York City, frequenting jazz clubs and museums. As Kerouac grew older he was constantly forming important friendships with other boys, as he would continue to do throughout his life.

Kerouac had an early interest in writing and literature. He would create stories at a young age, and read novels by Thomas Wolfe, the writer he modeled himself after. At seventeen years old, he obtained a football scholarship to Columbia University. His family followed him there and settled in Ozone Park, Queens. This was at the start of World War II, so Kerouac dropped out to enlist in the navy. The navy did not fair him well, he was discharged shortly after his enrollment due to his refusal to accept military discipline. He served the remainder of the war as a merchant marine.

After the war Kerouac returned to Columbia University. It was upon his return where he met the group of men, mostly criminals and drug dealers, who would become his eternal friends and the inspiration for his work. This group included: Herbert Hunke, criminal hero of Kerouac's underworld, William S. Burroughs, junk addict, and eventual novelist, Allen Ginsberg, poet and philosopher, and finally Neal Cassady, the mad hero of 'On The Road', which is said to be Kerouac's most famous novel.

Jack Kerouac's first published novel was called 'The Town and the City', this work was based on the style of Thomas Wolfe. It received mixed criticism and sold few copies. It was not until 'On the Road', his second book, that Kerouac found a voice of his own. 'On the Road' was a rather poetic story of a friendship, and four trips across America. Kerouac used the technique of spontaneous prose to write 'On the Road'. The narrator is Sal Paradise, a young novelist, with an insatiable desire to see America. He maintains a strange, and at times frustrating relationship with Dean Moriarty (which is Kerouac's real-life friend Neal Cassady).

The part of the story that held me the most was the ending. It is eminently ambiguous in terms of its meaning. For example, Sal made plans to go to the Duke Ellington concert, but he would rather be with Dean. However, Remi Bencoeur and his girlfriend do not like Dean. So in the end Sal just drives off with his friends and waves goodbye to Dean. To me, Dean Moriarty is the most magnetic character in the book, but everybody in the book gets sick of him at some point or another. Even Sal is forced to realize that he cannot depend on Dean to stick with him when the going gets rough. We also see that the joyrides get a little less joyful as they progress. I must pose the question, is it really possible that people need to grow up? That you cannot go riding around from adventure to adventure? Luckily, this book does not attempt to answer that question, it just lets us experience the sights and sounds along the way. 'On the Road' received high critical acclaim and eventually became known as the defying novel of the beat generation.

Kerouac eventually wrote 'Visions of Cody' in 1951-52, which completed his collection of a life sketch of a man who traveled all over the country, living for the sake of experience, and recording his observations of his journey. 'Visions of Cody' was also written in a radical, experimental form. I never experienced anything like 'Visions of Cody' before. I at times wanted to rip my hair out while reading it, yet there were times I did not want to put it down. It was a challenging read, although, well worth the effort. The New York Times book review said "to read 'On the Road', but not 'Visions of Cody', is to take a nice sightseeing tour, but to forego the spectacular rapids of Jack Kerouac's wildest writing." I do not think I could ever say it better than that. 'Visions of Cody' is the ultimate version of the 'On the Road' story.

Through his forty years, Kerouac was unable to remain in a long-term romantic relationship. He was married twice, however, both marriages ended within months. In the mid 1960's he married a childhood friend. She was convenient to have around to help Kerouac with his aging mother.

Jack Kerouac died in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1969. He began to vomit blood, and was rushed to the hospital where he died. The last few years of his life were plagued with sadness and alcoholism. I find it ironic how sadness and alcoholism enabled him to express himself the way he did, yet they also took away his

expressionism long before his time.

William S. Burroughs, now there is a character. As I write about him, I'm getting this kind of creepy vibe, almost like he is watching me write about him. I could almost hear his throaty, hoarse laugh. He honestly frightened me, his work frightened me, and his lifestyle was one of complete mayhem. Burroughs was born on Feb. 5, 1914, in St. Louis, Missouri. He was raised in an upper-class society, this did not suit his tastes. Burroughs liked to read, had a fascination with guns and crime, along with a natural inclination to break every possible rule. He also experienced and expressed strong homosexual desires. He could never fit into 'normal' society, although he did attend and graduate from Harvard University. In his early thirties he traveled to New York, where he intentionally became a junk addict (morphine and heroin). He dealt drugs and stole to support his habit. His St. Louis friend Lucien Carr introduced him to a young crowd studying at Columbia University, among them was Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. He was older than them, but they were impressed by his obvious intelligence. Kerouac and Ginsberg were interested in Burroughs' underworld experimentation, though they would not follow him very far into it. By his mid-thirties Burroughs had still not begun to write, although he always encouraged Ginsberg and Kerouac.

Writing first entered Burroughs life as a serious venture in 1950, when his old friend from Harvard, Kells Elvins, convinced him to write an account of his experiences with drugs. Burroughs agreed, and after much work he wrote *Junkie*. *Junkie* was not very interesting. It was an easy read, whose graphic nature made me wonder if Burroughs should have been walking the streets. As I read it I could not believe that it was autobiographical. After reading Kerouac and then Burroughs I was a little disappointed, I enjoyed Kerouac's writing much more.

In 1951 Burroughs accidentally shot and killed his common-law wife Joan. He was intoxicated one day, and tried to shoot a glass situated on her head, he of course missed, and shot her in the head. She was killed instantly. After he was arrested he escaped from Mexico, to South America. It was in South America where he officially began his writing career. Burroughs has said that he thinks it is unfortunate that it took the loss of his wife for him to find his creative abilities in writing. Burroughs was a homosexual, in his writings he was very explicit and his orientation, although, he did maintain a heterosexual relationship, and had a son through it.

His next publication is *'Naked Lunch'* in 1959. This book deals with his experiences with drugs, drug addiction, and the subconscious. His surrealist style and dream-like (or nightmare like) descriptions, along with his impressive experiences, make his writing unique and fascinating. This book slips and slides and glides through alleyways and canals of utter madness. It is degrading (he has said some nasty things about women), perverse, yet extremely clever, in a sick sort of way. The oddest aspect of *'Naked Lunch'* is Burroughs' juxtaposition, which in his later books turns into the cut-up technique. This technique is an experimental prose method, it is a way of exposing word and image controls and freeing the reader from them. He did not use standard prose, he used abrupt transformations, and placed chapters in any random order. His hallucinations were sometimes too hard to bear, but it is not very often you are able to get insight into the mind of a deeply disturbed, yet brilliant individual. Whether it was sex with bugs, or sex with his Spanish lover, Burroughs leaves quite a bit to the imagination, which at times scared me. I did not think I was even able to visualize some of the things he described.

Burroughs was the only beat figure not strongly influenced by Buddhist thought. This could be a telling fact as to why his writing is so creepy. William S. Burroughs died in Lawrence, Kansas, on August 3, 1997, of a heart attack. This put an end to an his era, yet he has left behind work that will influence generations of artists to come.

The beat society used drugs to help free their minds. Benzadrine (speed) was a symbol (and feeling) of perpetual motion for enhanced creativeness and flow of ideas. The high from heroin also served to enhance creativeness. All those involved in the beat movement used drugs with the notion that it will help them on their

literary endeavors.

Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs both contributed much to decline of a strictly narrow minded society. They were friends, and admired each others work, yet they were different. Each expressing himself the only way he knew fit, and collectively impacting our society. Burroughs gave us visuals into his madness, we were able to experience and appreciate the disease in his mind, which is drug addiction. Jack Kerouac on the other hand allowed us to travel with him on his journeys. We felt his loneliness, and watched him drink his sadness away. Both men were prisoners to their talents. Their passion was brought to fruition through words, their words were products of drugs, booze, music, experience, and life long friendships.

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