

The Beat Generation (1950s)

Beat poetry evolved during the 1940s in both New York City and on the west coast, although San Francisco became the heart of the movement in the early 1950s. The end of World War II left many poets questioning mainstream politics and culture. These poets would become known as the Beat generation, a group of writers interested in raising awareness and defying conventional writing.

The battle against social conformity and literary tradition was central to the work of the Beats. Among this group of poets, hallucinogenic drugs were used to achieve higher consciousness, as was meditation and Eastern religion. Buddhism especially was important to many of the Beat poets; Allen Ginsberg intensely studied this religion and it figured into much of their work.

Beliefs of the Beat Poets

What did they believe?

3 Steps to Resistance

How would they achieve these beliefs?

Beat Poets

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Burroughs

Kerouac

Ginsberg

I Am 25

Gregory Corso

With a love a madness for Shelley
Chatterton Rimbaud
and the needy-yap of my youth
has gone from ear to ear:
I HATE OLD POETMEN!
Especially old poetmen who retract
who consult other old poetmen
who speak their youth in whispers,
saying: – I did those then
but that was then
that was then –
O I would quiet old men
say to them: – I am your friend
what you once were, thru me
you'll be again –
Then at night in the confidence of their homes
rip out their apology-tongues
and steal their poems

Why does Corso hate old poetmen?

How will those old poetmen live again?

“Death”

Elise Cowen

Joke – someone drops pointed paper
cups (one by one – into the
long plastic container –
next to the watercooler
in the office) and they are falling –
slowly – and make no
sound in my ears

Explain the image the author is describing.

What do you think the silence at the end of
the poem means?

The End

Robert Creeley

When I know what people think of me
I am plunged into my loneliness. The gray

hat bought earlier sickens.
I have no purpose no longer distinguishable.

A feeling like being choked
enters my throat.

What do you make of the gray hat line?

Why does the author not have a purpose?

from Blues for Sister Sally

Lenore Kandel

III

midnight and the room dream – green and hazy
we are all part of the collage

brother and sister, she leans against the wall
and he, slipping the needle in her painless arm

pale fingers (with love) against the pale arm

IV

children our afternoon is soft, we lean against
each other

our stash is in our elbows
our fix is in our heads
god is a junkie and he has sold salvation
for a week's supply

Describe the image of the collage.

Why is there a sharp contrast between III
and IV?

How to Meditate

Jack Kerouac

- lights out -
fall, hands a-clasped, into instantaneous
ecstasy like a shot of heroine or morphine,
the gland inside my brain discharging
the good glad fluid (Holy Fluid) as
I hap-down and hold all my body parts
down to a deadstop trance - Healing
all my sickness - erasing all - not
even the shred of a "I-hope-you" or a
Loony Balloon left in it, but the mind
blank, serene, thoughtless. When a thought
comes a-springing from afar with its held-
forth figure of image, you spoof it out,
you spuff it off, you fake it, and
it fades, and thought never comes - and
with joy you realize for the first time
"Thinking's just like not thinking -
So I don't have to think
any
more"

What is the author describing in the beginning of the poem?

How is thinking just like not thinking?

On Which I Renounce the Notion of Social Responsibility

Philip Whalen

The minute I'm out of town
My friends get sick, go back on the sauce
Engage in unhappy love affairs
They write me letters & I worry

Am I their brains, their better sense?

All of us want something to do.

I am breathing. I am not asleep.

In this context: Fenellosa translated *No*
(Japanese word) as "accomplishment"

(a pun for the hip?)

Something to do

"I will drag you there by the hair of your head!"
& he began doing just that to his beautiful wife
Until their neighbors (Having nothing better to do)
Broke it up

If nothing else we must submit ourselves
To the charitable impulses of our friends
Give them a crack at being bodhisattvas
(although their benevolence is a heavy weight
on my head
their good intentions an act of aggression)

Motion of shadows where there's neither light nor
eye to see
Mind a revolving door
My head a falling star

What do we do when we have nothing to do?

What becomes a revolving door, then?

Song

Allen Ginsberg

The weight of the world
is love.
Under the burden
of solitude,
under the burden
of dissatisfaction

the weight,
the weight we carry
is love.

Who can deny?
In dreams
it touched
the body,
in thought
constructs
a miracle,
in imagination
anguishes
till born
in human –

looks out of the heart
burning with purity –
for the burden of life
is love,

but we carry the weight
wearily,
and so we must rest
in the arms of love
at last,
must rest in the arms
of love.

No rest
without love,
no sleep
without dreams

of love –
be mad or chill
obsessed with angels
or machines,
the final wish
is love
– cannot be bitter,
cannot deny,
cannot withhold
if denied:

the weight is too heavy
– must give
for no return
as thought
is given
in solitude
in all the excellence
of its excess.

The warm bodies
shine together
in the darkness,
the hand moves
to the center
of the flesh,
the skin trembles
in happiness
and the soul comes
joyful to the eye –

yes, yes,
that's what
I wanted,
I always wanted,
I always wanted,
to return
to the body
where I was born.

How is the burden of life, love?

What does every human being want?

Re-Reading #2

Lined writing area for Re-Reading #2

Re-Reading #3

Lined writing area for Re-Reading #3

How did your reading of the poem change?

What are the possible benefits of this re-reading strategy? What about negatives?

A Thanksgiving Prayer

William S. Burroughs

Thanks for the wild turkey and
the passenger pigeons, destined
to be sh-- out through wholesome
American guts.

Thanks for a continent to despoil
and poison.
Thanks for Indians to provide a
modicum of challenge and
danger.

Thanks for vast herds of bison to
kill and skin leaving the
carcasses to rot.
Thanks for bounties on wolves
and coyotes.

Thanks for the American dream,
To vulgarize and to falsify until
the bare lies shine through.

Thanks for the KKK.

For nigger-killin' lawmen,
feelin' their notches.

For decent church-goin' women,
with their mean, pinched, bitter,
evil faces.

Thanks for "Kill a Queer for
Christ" stickers.

Thanks for laboratory AIDS.

Thanks for Prohibition and the
war against drugs.

Thanks for a country where
nobody's allowed to mind the
own business.

Thanks for a nation of finks.

Yes, thanks for all the
memories -- all right let's see
your arms!

You were always a headache and you always were a bore.

Thanks for the last and greatest
betrayal of the last and greatest
of human dreams.

1. What do you think are the themes of "A Thanksgiving Prayer?" What makes you believe those are the themes?

2. What writing activities can you see present in Burrough's work?

3. What about his writing style leads you to believe that he used those writing strategies?

Cut it Up

Burroughs sought to disrupt the flow of expectation and jar the reader into some sort of realization. One method he used to accomplish this was "cut-ups" where one literally cuts up texts and rearranges them. He saw this as deconstruction of language, as an act of spiritual rebellion; as he once said, "the tongue is the enemy of the spirit."

Directions:

1. On a separate sheet of paper, draw a table with 3 columns and 7 rows.

born . . .		

2. In the table, write an autobiography. Keep it simple and non-literary. It doesn't matter what you write. Start with "I was born . . ." Write until the table is filled in. As you write, be sure to end and begin words before and after the vertical lines.
3. Now take a pair of scissors and cut the two vertical lines. What you have left are 3 strips of text. Experiment with them, pushing them up and down beside each other. Exchange the left-to-right order at times. In your journal, glue your new cut-up biography as it appears through your experiments.

Nothing is True

The idea that "nothing is true, everything is permitted" occurs in nearly every book by Burroughs. Write out 3 things you wish weren't true (the more unreal, the better!):

Some examples:

1. There is no death.
2. There is no Mr. Randon.
3. There are no alarm clocks.

Everything is Permitted

If the 3 things you just wrote out are not true, then what exactly does their fallacy permit? What will you do if nothing is true? Write 3 formerly forbidden or impossible things that are now permitted to you, based upon the "Nothing is True" exercise:

My examples:

1. I will experience absolutely everything.
2. I can be anybody I want to be.
3. I can get all the sleep I want.

Word Virus

"Language is a virus." Those who control the meaning and supply of words can control those who use them. It is not so much *what* you say, but rather the order in which you say it.

1. Take three of the following clichés and rearrange the words to create a new meaning:

Don't beat around the bush.
A hit dog will always holler.
A bird in the hand is worth 2 in the bush.
If you denied it, you supplied it.
One man's junk is another man's treasure.
An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
What is meant to be will be.
The grass is always greener on the other side.
A rolling stone gathers no moss.
If you play with fire, you will get burned.

2. Write a single original sentence consisting of no more than 6 or 7 words. Rearrange the order of the words until other possibilities reveal themselves, and you are at the end of your semantic rope.

Reality Studio

Assault places where Control is concentrated and reclaim the right to write your own script, realizing that this is *your* movie.

1. Name the film of your life. Choose a name of an already existing movie or TV show, one that closely matches (in title) the feel of your life.
2. Write a short *TV Guide*-type synopsis. It can be the actual script or one that you make up.
3. Write a different ending for the movie you feel you are in. How would you *really* like the movie to end?

Pirate Utopia

A utopia is a "perfect" world. Small, well-chosen communities are the antidote to Control. They equal a life and death commitment to freedom in its most absolute and experiential form.

1. Imagine yourself about to embark upon the founding of a "pirate utopia."
2. What laws would you joyfully and defiantly break as the basis for the community (at least 3)?
3. Where is your ideal location?
4. What chief threat or enemy would you have?
5. What sort of people would you fancy having around you?
6. What would your main activity consist of?
7. Name your utopia.
8. Visually represent your utopia.

Jack Kerouac Writing Activities

Untitled

Jack Kerouac

Some trust the wolf
they have raised since birth
not to turn on them.

Some trust their lives
In the hands whose fingers
Are five silent lives.

Some will be reminded
of nothing, or perish
by that memory.

Untitled

Jack Kerouac

The people down
The hallway who
Stab each other
Each Friday night...

Is that a ritual?

Or just something terribly unresolved?

1. What do you think are the themes of the untitled poems? What makes you believe those are the themes?

2. What writing activities can you see present in Kerouac's work?

3. What about his writing style leads you to believe that he used those writing strategies?

Haiku and You

A traditional haiku is written in 3 short lines of 17 syllables, the first line containing five syllables, the second seven, and the third five. The haiku usually contains a seasonal reference. Kerouac insisted that we break the rules in order to create something new. He said that a haiku should simply consist of 3 very short lines.

A Kerouac haiku: In my medicine cabinet
 The winter fly has died
 Of old age

In 3 short lines and with a minimum of thinking, describe what you see in front of you right this minute, no more and no less.

Write 3 lines describing what you are hearing right now (same rules).

Write 3 lines describing your present interior emotional state.

Spontaneous Writing

Kerouac's advice: Remove literary, grammatical, and syntactical inhibition.

Kerouac often removed punctuation and played with spelling and grammar in his writing. Write a description of your school day. Invoke a purposeful transgression of literary rules, eliminate punctuation or make up new ones# misspell as many words as you can or respell them in a creative manner/// grammar invert where possible. U kin Bgin 2 cents th pozzibilitiez 4 know only writing butt 4 yr LIFE Az well:::

Word Sketching

One must be less a writer than an artist. Instead of using lines to capture a portrait, you instead use words. Sketching with words is the solvent used to eventually dissolve this artificial barrier to realization.

Just begin writing as fast as you possibly can, describing what you are seeing or experiencing. If you pause to reflect, the censor/editor in your brain will start its nitpicking and revisions. Just write without regard to quality, grammar or punctuation, using dashes to separate thoughts or descriptions. Do NOT erase!!

Patron Saint

One must maintain a pure, innocent, and hopeful heart. Kerouac's personal patron saint was Saint Therese, who, ironically, also died at a young age.

Do you have a patron saint? If yes, who? What does he/she represent to you?

Decide on an historical figure who you can attempt to measure yourself against and times, a figure who inspires and prods you into attaining all you can. Write a brief description of this person and why you chose him/her.

“Be in Love with Yr Life”

Yet another piece of advice from Kerouac: it is the dignity and truth on one's own experience that matters most. Who are we? We are what and whom we love, and we are the way in which we choose to love. Victory is attained when we fall deeply in love with all that we experience, and we learn to flow with it – not afraid to make it up as we go. This is all the beat spirit demands.

Capture a bit of the spirit and list the things you love about your life (at least 5):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

To really capture the spirit, list at least 3 things you love about your life every day.

Allen Ginsberg Writing Activities

Homework

Allen Ginsberg

If I were doing my Laundry I'd wash my dirty Iran
I'd throw in my United States, and pour on the Ivory Soap,
scrub up Africa, put all the birds and elephants back in
the jungle,
I'd wash the Amazon river and clean the oily Carib & Gulf of Mexico,
Rub that smog off the North Pole, wipe up all the pipelines in Alaska,
Rub a dub dub for Rocky Flats and Los Alamos, Flush that sparkly
Cesium out of Love Canal
Rinse down the Acid Rain over the Parthenon & Sphinx, Drain the Sludge
out of the Mediterranean basin & make it azure again,
Put some blueing back into the sky over the Rhine, bleach the little
Clouds so snow return white as snow,
Cleanse the Hudson Thames & Neckar, Drain the Suds out of Lake Erie
Then I'd throw big Asia in one giant Load & wash out the blood &
Agent Orange,
Dump the whole mess of Russia and China in the wringer, squeeze out
the tattletail Gray of U.S. Central American police state,
& put the planet in the drier & let it sit 20 minutes or an
Aeon till it came out clean

4. What do you think is the theme of "Homework?" What makes you believe that is the theme?

5. What writing activities can you see present in Ginsberg's work?

6. What about his writing style leads you to believe that he used those writing strategies?

Ending War

Refuse to participate in the general madness or be a party to the Big Lie by declaring the end of something equally horrific in your life or world. Call upon divine powers if you are so inclined or do it in the name of your own trembling and mortal flesh, or that of your friends and family.

The object of your termination could be a war, a job, a feeling of worthlessness, or whatever fits your particular bill.

In the names of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Saul Williams, the colleague who never agrees with me, and creative expression, I hereby declare the end to the silence of solitude in my house, on my TV, in arguments, and on the page.

Here's a fill in the blank form to make it easy for you to start:

In the names of _____, _____,
_____, and _____, I hereby declare the end of
(to) _____.

Poem Bombs

This activity comes from Beat poet Gregory Corso. His poem, "Bomb," was originally published as a long one-page fold out in order to accommodate the unique format of the poem. The words of the piece were arranged in the actual shape of an atomic mushroom cloud.

Write a description of something in your life in its own shape.

Are
You sad?
Say so in the
Shape of a large
Teardrop.

Fast Speaking

Anne Waldman's "Fast Speaking Woman" runs for 23 pages and is a variation and repetition of one formula: "I'm a fast speaking woman." The line is repeated in machine-gun fashion, the adjective changing with each recitation. These poems are meant to be read aloud.

Rude Hieroglyphics

In these partner poems, poets share a dialogue on a specific topic or idea. One person writes in print (or regular type) while the other writes in cursive (or bold type). From the two voices should emerge a third, thus giving the poem a life of its own.

With a partner and on a separate sheet of paper, write a "Fast Speaking" poem in this way. Do not discuss the poem with your partner; simply pass the sheet of paper back and forth until you reach a conclusion.

You can use a variation of the line from "Fast Speaking" to get you started, and then see where the poem evolves from there.

"I'm a _____ woman, man, person..."

